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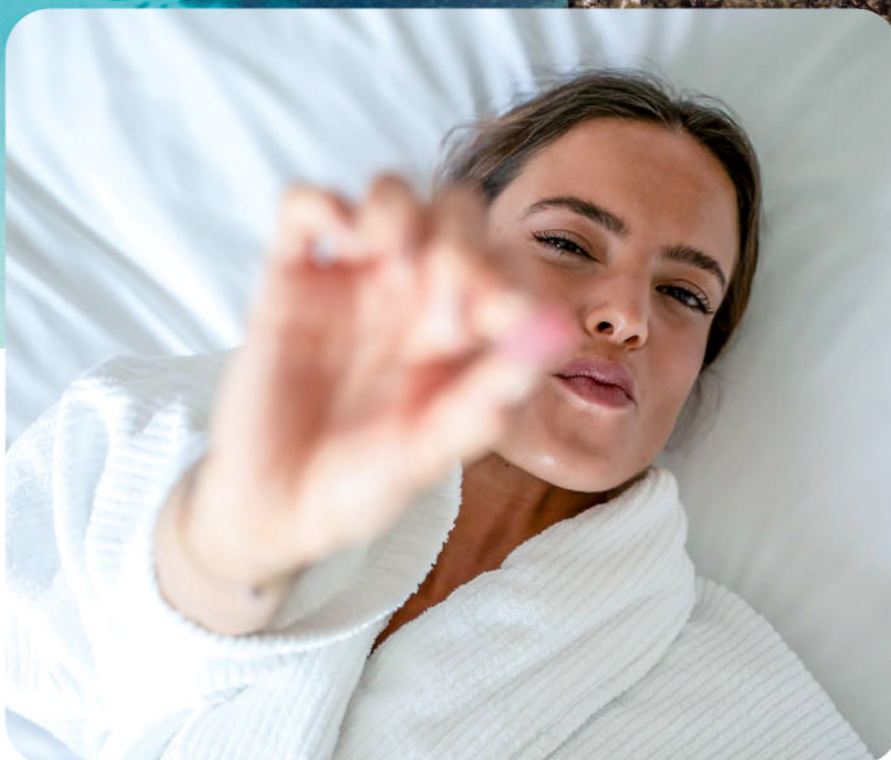
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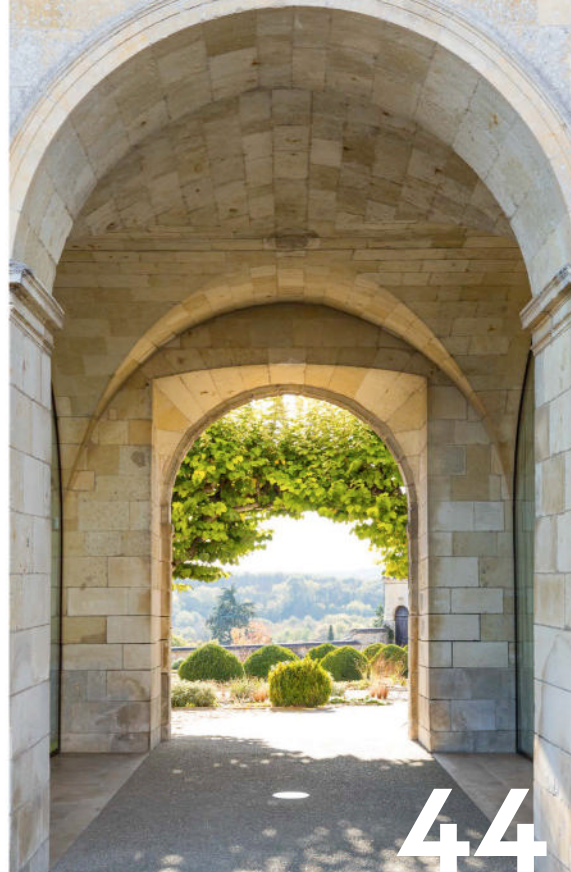
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Sunrise near Catavina, Baja California, Mexico.
 Image: AWL Images

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Adrian Phillips

Le Mans is synonymous with fast cars, but it's a place to slow down in, too, with a charming old town and restaurants. Venture beyond the city limits, and you'll find master potters, an eccentric brush seller and a great spot for climbing trees. **LE MANS & AROUND P.44**



Lorna Parkes

Returning to places that I loved in my backpacking days has been a recurring theme lately – and Fez didn't disappoint. Negotiating its GPS-defying backstreets to interview female chefs and taste ancient recipes was a real joy. **FEZ P.50**



Jessica Vincent

Mexico has fascinated me since I first visited Yucatán as a child. The ancient Maya and Aztec cities, Indigenous cultures, fantastic food and landscapes that span Caribbean beaches to snow-capped mountains and desert lure me back year on year. **MEXICO P.66**



Daniel Stables

Croatia, Yugoslavia, Italy and Austria have all claimed ownership of Istria over the past 120 years, but its culture is entirely its own. It was a pleasure to discover unique strains of folk music and learn about Venetian-influenced Istrian languages during my visit. **ISTRIA P.102**



Orla Thomas

Philadelphia flew under my radar until recently. An oversight, it turns out, as it's got bags of character. The food scene is second to none, but I also loved the sense of space in the urban centre, and how each neighbourhood feels completely distinct. **PHILADELPHIA P.138**

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Editor's letter

ISSUE 122, MAY 2024



It's easy to forget how big Mexico is. The 13th-largest country in the world and 11th-most-populated, it offers such a breadth and depth of experiences that a fleeting visit to Mexico City and Puerto Vallarta on the west coast — I'm talking about me here — only served to whet my appetite for more.

In this issue, we pick out a number of the country's unique, often Indigenous, experiences, many of them easily accessible from the destinations that travellers traditionally visit.

The Yucatán Peninsula — home to the ever-popular Maya ruins of Chichén Itzá and Tulum, as well as spectacular Caribbean beaches — is where you'll find the Camino del Mayab, a long-distance hiking and biking trail. This 68-mile project, designed to preserve local culture and wildlife, reveals a world of cenotes, abandoned haciendas, tropical jungle and Maya communities.

In Baja California, over on the Pacific coast, we go off-roading on desert tracks to explore the world's second-longest peninsula. It's a place where a sense of adventure pervades, and where the rain can see sun-baked sierras transform as mesquite trees burst into leaf and wildflowers bloom pink and yellow.

And there's so much more to discover: the Indigenous crafts scene of Mexico City, the female chefs championing the recipes of Oaxaca, the booming mezcal industry in the same southern state and an epic rail journey on the Chepe Express, from coast to mountains through the Copper Canyon.

So, if you'll join me, we have some exploring to do.

Pat Riddell, editor



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Travel Geeks

On 16 May, join our panel of experts for this live, hour-long event in central London, which will provide tips, tricks and inspiration to plan the ultimate Greek island-hopping adventure. nptr.uk/sunsail



Food Festival

Don't miss your chance to master an array of regional specialities, sit down with leading food writers, taste the world's wines and learn from top chefs and leading culinary personalities at this year's food festival **p.174**

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A man with short dark hair and a light beard, wearing gold-rimmed aviator sunglasses and a vibrant red long-sleeved linen button-down shirt. He is looking upwards and to the left against a clear, bright blue sky. The lighting is bright, casting soft shadows on his face and shirt.

If you pack one thing this summer,
make it linen.

CHARLES TYRWHITT

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SNAPSHOT

Lee Chee Cheng, Penang, Malaysia

'Master Lee' is one of the few remaining practitioners of a dying art: Chinese signboard carving. During a morning walk in George Town, Penang's capital, I spotted him giving someone a carving lesson at the entrance to his workshop. I introduced myself and was struck by his friendly smile. Over the next few days, I returned to take photos and discuss the intricacies of his work. In addition to these engraved, gold-leaf signs, he carves Chinese deities and ancestral tablets for temples, earning him the title 'living legend of Penang'.

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BIG PICTURE

Copenhagen, Denmark

I came to Copenhagen as part of Adaptation, a project documenting how people interact with their environment. I'd taken the shots I needed, but I decided to stay on a while in the capital. One day, I strolled the streets at dawn, when the city had yet to wake up. I passed by some townhouses and decided to send up a drone to capture the view. I couldn't have imagined what I'd discover: rows and rows of almost identical buildings, stretching to the horizon.

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From top: Lifeguard tower on Miami's South Beach; a small-scale study of Petroc Sesti's Heart of Okeanos sculpture



MIAMI

Aquatic Art

ART, SCIENCE AND NATURE CONVERGE IN THE REEF LINE, AN UNDERWATER SCULPTURE PARK AND SNORKEL TRAIL

Visitors to Miami will soon be able to take the plunge into a new world of art. The first phase of The ReefLine, an aquatic sculpture park, is set to open 600ft off the shore of South Beach this summer. When complete, the park will comprise sculptures by internationally renowned artists positioned along a seven-mile underwater gallery and snorkel trail. The aim is an innovative fusion of art and science that will both wow its flipper-clad visitors and act as a rallying cry for marine conservation.

Swimmers will access The ReefLine by following the snorkel trail, which is linked by pathways built to resemble natural reef. The structures will incorporate eco-friendly materials to provide habitat for endangered reef organisms, promoting biodiversity and bolstering coastal resilience. Developed by the environmental organisation BlueLab Preservation Society in partnership with the City of Miami Beach, The ReefLine will also be a space for restoration, with scientists from the University of Miami planting coral species that can withstand rising sea levels.

"There's a pressing need to educate the community about our precious marine resources and the imperative to preserve them," says Shelby Thomas, of the Ocean Rescue Alliance, who will lead The ReefLine's team of marine conservationists.

Representing the first phase of artworks is Leandro Erlich's Concrete Coral, an underwater incarnation of his Order of Importance installation — a traffic jam made out of sand, displayed on Miami Beach during Art Week in 2019. His new version won't degrade over time but will instead be colonised by coral life. Future phases will include work by British artist Petroc Sesti, who has crafted a giant whale's heart in CarbonXinc, an experimental material capable of sequestering significant quantities of greenhouse gasses. Seeded with living corals, Heart of Okeanos will become a pulsating haven of marine lifeforms.

While the art will be within easy reach for swimmers of most abilities, a VR experience will also be available for visitors staying on



IN NUMBERS The ReefLine

22

The number of car sculptures making up Leandro Erlich's Concrete Coral artwork

1 mile

The likely length of the first phase; the park will stretch seven miles when complete

2025

The year a competition for artists wishing to contribute to the next phase will open

295%

The increase in fish numbers at MOUA, a similar project in Australia, after two years

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The Isle of Wight Walking Festival offers iconic views such as the Needles

UK WALKING FESTIVALS

FOOTLOOSE FUN

The Isle of Wight Walking Festival is celebrating its 25th anniversary this year — and a number of similar events are taking place across the UK as the weather warms up

BEST FOR ISLANDS

Isle of Wight Walking Festival

This festival celebrates its 25th anniversary in 2024, with an event in spring and another in autumn. Book onto the spring session to see the island's natural world beginning to stir — guided walks take participants in search of red squirrels, passing through bluebell woods, wading the shallows on a seagrass harvesting project and exploring the steep, sublime scenery of West Wight. **11-19 May** isleofwightwalkingfestival.co.uk

BEST FOR EASY WALKS

Suffolk Walking Festival

If the contours of Wales, the English Lakes or the Scottish Highlands seem too daunting, head to the more kindly gradients of Suffolk for this walking festival. Close to 60 guided walks explore this famously flat county, ranging from potters beside the North Sea coast at eerie Orford Ness to saunters amid the more idyllic landscapes of Dedham Vale. **11-26 May** suffolkwalkingfestival.co.uk

BEST FOR VILLAGES

Winchcombe Walking Festival

Hikers come to the Cotswolds for the wooded escarpments and blustery commons, but it's also beloved for having some of England's loveliest towns and villages. Among them is Winchcombe, an ancient Anglo-Saxon capital hosting a walking festival in May. Hikes explore pubs, parishes and pathways — including a meteorite-themed walk in honour of a celestial object that crash landed in February 2021. **17-19 May** winchcombewelcomeswalkers.com

BEST FOR MOUNTAINS

Arran Mountain Festival

Anyone wishing to dip their toe into Scottish mountaineering should head to the Isle of Arran: not only are its hills said to represent the Highlands in miniature, but it also hosts the Arran Mountain Festival, with a programme of walks for many abilities. Head up Goatfell — the island's highest point (874m) — or traverse the A'Chir ridge, with vertical drops

BEST FOR COASTLINE

Gower Walking Festival

The Gower is a finger of land protruding into the sea west of Swansea, with cliffs rising sheer from the swells of the Bristol Channel. The annual festival's programme is still being finalised, but Wales's finest beaches are likely to play a starring role: hikers will pass the sandy sweep of Rhossili Beach, the little coves of Caswell and Pwll Du and, best of all, the great wandering estuary at Three Cliffs. **7-15 September** gowerwalkingfestival.uk

BEST FOR LITERATURE

Richmond Walking and Book Festival

The festival offers a two for one, promising to combine 'boots and books', 'walks and words'. This year's schedule is still to be confirmed, but expect to spend days pacing the uplands of the Yorkshire Dales National Park, with evenings resting tired feet but exercising curious minds, listening to authors read from their work. **20-29 September** richmondwalkingandbookfestival.co.uk

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MUST-TRY DISHES

BUREK

Layers of super-thin pastry are stretched out and filled with white cheese, meat or spinach before being baked. Pick one up wrapped in grease-soaked paper from a *burek* shop and wash it down with a drink of sour, fermented yoghurt to cut through the fat.

KAJMAK

This take on clotted cream is made by slowly heating raw milk and carefully skimming the top layer of cream. Enjoy it on some fresh bread or on top of grilled meat in a *kafana* — it will melt away and add extra richness.

TULUMBI

This syrup-drenched, fried dough has been mastered by a local called Dostana, whose shop is tucked away in the Old Bazaar of Skopje, North Macedonia's capital. Just ask for the 'older lady who makes the tulumbi'; you'll be sent in the right direction.

Essential ingredient

Brined, salty white cheese, usually made from sheep's or cow's milk, is enjoyed at any time of the day, in breads and pastries or simply on its own

Left: A burek pie, best enjoyed with a sour, fermented yoghurt drink

A TASTE OF

North Macedonia

THE CULINARY CULTURE OF THIS BALKAN COUNTRY IS SEASONAL AND STEEPED IN TRADITION

Sitting on the Balkan Peninsula of southeast Europe, North Macedonia is fairly self-contained and self-sufficient — meaning it's steeped in local food traditions. Agriculture weaves through society, and markets heave with independent farmers displaying rich cheeses, juicy olives, fresh fruit and veg and much more. By the side of the road, men sit on upturned beer crates selling plastic bottles of homemade *rakija* (grape brandy) or dried herbs from the fields surrounding their homes.

Summer in North Macedonia is scorching hot, while winter is a time of snowfall, and we eat with the seasons — salty grilled meats and sweet tomato salads in the warm months and stews to get us through the cold. Then, there are almost mystical moments in the culinary calendar, such as making huge batches of *yufki* (egg noodles) at the end of August to allow them to dry naturally in the sun. Or ritual preserving, which sees the whole family capture the end of the harvest season in jars.



Many food traditions come from the 70% of the population who observe the Orthodox calendar, but the strongest current that defines how we eat and feed is the notion of hospitality. When calling on someone, you're given *slatko* (fruits preserved in a thick syrup) to sweeten your visit, and even if you're just popping in for a coffee

you'll probably end up staying for dinner. Eating out is defined by *kafanas* (local tavernas), of which there are more than 5,000 in a country with a population of only two million. The obsession with these all-day, all-welcome establishments is representative of how we like to eat: at a slow pace, enjoying each morsel. We start with a shot of something strong, some salad and a gossip. And each person who joins the table throughout the day or night orders something new, meaning the plates are always full.

Doma, by Spasia Pandora Dinkovski, is available in paperback (£12.99) and hardcover (£24.99). Join Search <https://t.me/sharewithpride> (sharewithpride)

SPASIA DINKOVSKI

is a cookbook author, chef and the founder of London food shop Mystic Burek. mysticburek.com



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Hotel Amadeus

Inspired by Seville's rich classical music heritage, this boutique hotel is housed in a group of lovingly converted 18th-century mansions in the Barrio de Santa Cruz — a photogenic warren of cobbled medieval streets around Seville Cathedral. The decor pays homage to history with hanging lanterns and walls adorned with azulejo tiles. Instruments such as harps and grand pianos also decorate courtyards and even some guest rooms. From €204 (£174), B&B. hotelamadeussevilla.com

Triana House

In the traditional riverside barrio of Triana, this beautiful hotel is set in a late-1700s residence. Opulent tilework is coupled with latticed screens evoking the Moorish windows of the Alhambra fortress in nearby Granada, while private terraces feel like the alcoves of the Plaza de España, a short walk away across the Guadalquivir River. From €179 (£153), B&B. trianahouse.com

Hotel Casa de Colón

This hotel combines a homely atmosphere with a great location in the Barrio de Santa Cruz, close to the Real Alcázar palace and the Flamenco Dance Museum. The rooms in this 19th-century building have a farmhouse feel, with rustic wooden furniture, antique dressers and exposed brick walls. The owners direct guests to the best local *castizos* (tapas bars). From €207 (£177). hotelcasadecolon.com **DANIEL STABLES**

Nobu Hotel Sevilla

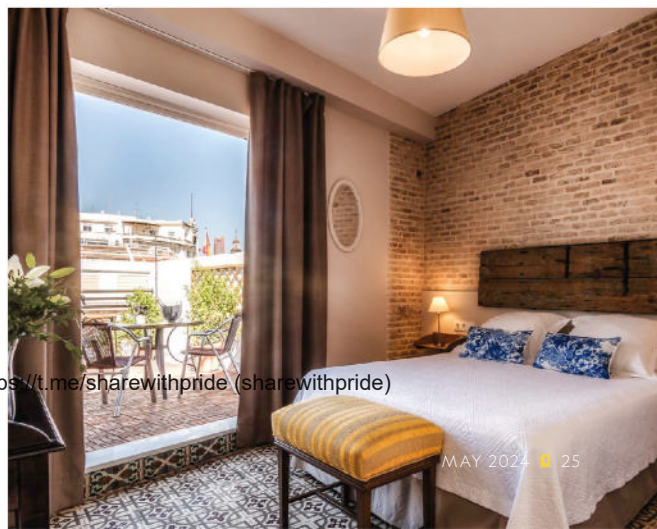
Seville's aesthetic history has been all about the blending of cultures, with Islamic and Christian influences sitting alongside contemporary architecture in the city centre. Nobu Hotel Sevilla followed in this tradition when it opened in the Spanish city in April 2023, taking on an elegant townhouse conversion and consciously blending Andalusian craftsmanship with contemporary design and the brand's signature Japanese minimalism.

The 25 guest rooms are furnished with mid-century armchairs, mirrors and coffee tables. Sleek grey-marble bathrooms with freestanding tubs betray the Japanese influence, while period features from the building's early-20th-century heyday are retained in parquet floors and wood-panelled walls. There are unmistakably Andalusian features, too — particularly the geometric ceramics and Moorish wall niches in communal areas.

Naturally, the ultra-luxe hotel is also home to a Nobu restaurant, with the same fusion of Japanese and Andalusian influences. The signature dish is miso black cod, which diners can follow with a local dessert of churros dipped in liquid chocolate. Seville's ancient history is represented, too: the restaurant is centred around a Roman wall, uncovered during the renovation.

Nobu Sevilla's location is also a selling point; it's in Plaza de San Francisco, close to Seville's famous cathedral and the bars of the 16th-century garden square, La Alameda. Then there's the hotel's rooftop garden; it's an unbeatable place to relax, feet in the pool, glass in hand.

From €285 (£244) nobuhotel.com **More in News and Travel from Magazines Telegram Channel** <https://t.me/sharewithpride> (sharewithpride)



From top: A view across the rooftops of Seville's Old Quarter; the ground-floor bar at Nobu Hotel; the penthouse room with private terrace at Hotel Casa de Colón



FAMILY

SLUMBER PARTIES

Embark on your own family night at the museum with these after-dark experiences

Best for aspiring astronauts
SCIENCE MUSEUM, LONDON

Designed for seven- to 11-year-olds, this vast museum dedicated to human ingenuity runs space-inspired Astronights. The experience includes workshops, science shows and sessions in both the museum's IMAX cinema and its Wonderlab, which has seven zones dedicated to scientific phenomena. If you upgrade to a VIP ticket, you get an airbed instead of a camping mat, plus extra treats at breakfast. sciencemuseum.org.uk

Best for history-lovers
BRITISH MUSEUM, LONDON

Created for eight- to 15-year-olds, the nocturnal adventures at this vast repository of artefacts from around the globe have a changing historic theme. Workshops, activities and storytelling help bring the past vividly to life. Families then bed down in the Egyptian and Assyrian galleries, surrounded by kings and gods from the ancient world. After

breakfast the next morning, guests are privy to an exclusive gallery trail before the museum opens to the public. britishmuseum.org

Best for budding palaeontologists
NATIONAL MUSEUM CARDIFF

As an alternative to the popular Natural History Museum experience in London, this Welsh venue invites kids aged six to 12 on sleepovers centred around its geology and natural history exhibits. It includes a torchlit tour, craft workshops inspired by fossils from the collection and a pre-bedtime movie. VIP ticket-holders also get a visit from 'Ranger Chris' with one of his reptiles, time with a palaeontologist and a peek into the museum's store of dinosaur bones. museum.wales

Best for drama students
GRAND THÉÂTRE, GENEVA

A Swiss institution built in 1879, retaining its original beaux-arts facade, this opera house and ballet venue organises sleepovers

open to all ages. Stays include a tour of the building and its maze-like backstage areas, set to a soundtrack of music from days gone by. Afterwards, you'll bed down with your sleeping mat, sleeping bag or blanket, pillow and teddy bear in the grand foyer with its chandeliers, gilded surfaces, frescoes, wood panelling and lavish paintings. gtg.ch

Best for Top Gun fans
INTREPID MUSEUM, NEW YORK CITY

Travellers to the Big Apple can sleep over in this museum on the Hudson, housed inside a Second World War aircraft carrier. The exhibits focus on American military and maritime history, and Operation Slumber gives families with kids aged six to 17 the opportunity to delve deeper into what it takes to live, eat and sleep aboard an aircraft carrier. The experience includes a torchlight guided tour of the flight deck, unlimited simulator rides and a pop-up planetarium. intrepidmuseum.org

RHONDA CARRIER

CULTURE NIGHTS FOR OLDER KIDS

NUIT BLANCHE, PARIS

This year's 'white night' — when the French capital is sprinkled with installations, sculptures, projections, concerts and trails — will be a bumper one to honour France's hosting of the summer Olympics. 1 More newspaper and Magazine Telegraph Channel 4 Search [@showwithmeid](https://t.me/showwithmeid) (show with me id)

LANGE NACHT DER MUSEEN, BERLIN

The 'Long Night of the Museums' in Berlin sees cultural venues stay open until 2am. A single ticket gives access to around 75 museums and 750 exhibitions, and under-12s go free. 24 August

NOTTE BIANCA, MALTA

See the island capital Valletta transformed with art exhibitions, after-dark theatre and dance and music performances in its streets and piazzas. Food stalls cater for late-night

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INSIDE GUIDE

LAKE COMO

The western branch of this northern Italian lake is its highlight, home to romantic villas and revamped waterfront promenades in pretty Como city

WORDS: ANGELA LOCATELLI. ILLUSTRATION: MARTIN HAAKE

Lake Como conveys notions of easy elegance and the Italian art of slow living, and has come to stand for something bigger than it is. Officially called Lario, Italy's third-biggest lake has been drawing visitors since the 18th century, when it was a popular stop for European nobles on their grand tours. More recently, it stepped into the spotlight as the backdrop for films including *Ocean's Twelve* and *Casino Royale*. But the lake's prestige dates to Roman times, when Julius Caesar drained a swamp at its southwestern end, strategically located near Alpine passes, and funded the creation of a city known as Novum Comum. It laid the foundation for Como, the main hub to this day and the reason why the lake is commonly known as Como.

This spring is the best time to visit the city in over a decade, as sections of its waterfront sidewalks, which had been cordoned off for expansion since 2008, are once again open to walkers. The centre is dominated by the azure dome of the **Duomo di Como**, one of the last gothic cathedrals built in the country. Behind it is **Teatro Sociale** (1), and to one side is the shopping street of Via Vittorio Emanuele II. It's a good place to pick up a souvenir: mulberry trees were planted on Lake Como's hills in the 15th century, and boutiques like **A Picci** sell handkerchiefs and scarves using their silk. cattedraledicomo.it apicci.it

Next to the shop, Via Lambertenghi leads to **Via Alessandro Volta**, named after the physicist credited as the inventor of the electric battery. The townhouse where he was born in 1745 is marked with a plaque, and around it are some of the most coveted addresses of the time. This is not least thanks to their *giardini pensili* — gardens built on the Roman walls that once guarded the city centre.

Equally evocative is **Passeggiata Lino Gelpi**, between the lake and shorefront private gardens. The path's name pays tribute to the 19th-century mayor who reclaimed a strip of land from villa owners to pave Como's most scenic public footpaths. It's a front-row spot from which to watch the lake's seaplanes land, and it's especially lovely in spring, when wisteria blooms along the banks.

Continue walking along the waterside road for half an hour to **Cernobbio**, one of the lake's most popular resorts. Local Comaschi come to eat at **Harry's Bar**, in a piazza by the

shore; it serves whitefish from the lake, but the pick is the sole meuniere, floured and pan fried to crispy perfection. Alternatively, taxis wind up the hillside to **Il Gatto Nero**. It serves specialities from the surrounding region, such as ravioli with ossobuco and saffron, and has become popular among visiting celebrities thanks to its view of the lake. harrysbarcernobbio.it ristorantegattonero.it

For a different perspective, take to the water. Ferries link Como to the Alto Lago ('High Lake'), its northernmost shore. But, if budget allows, the transport mode of choice are Riva runabouts. High-end hotels offer private rides on these mahogany speedboats as part of their activity programmes. Otherwise, companies like Como Classic Boats pick visitors up from almost any hamlet with a dock. navigazioneelaghi.it comoclassicboats.com

Among the most prettiest is **Torno**, on the western shore, with red-tiled roofs and a waterfront bell tower. It's opposite **Passalacqua**; built in the 18th century for a scion of local nobility, this villa was crowned the world's top hotel by The World's 50 Best in 2023, a year after opening. A glimpse is all you'll get, as only guests are allowed in, but as an alternative visit **Villa d'Este**, the lake's historic grand dame hotel. Further down the shores, highlights include **Villa Carlotta** (2) and neoclassical **Villa del Balbianello**, which juts out on a promontory in Ossuccio. passalacqua.it villadeste.com fondoambiente.it

A former fishing community, Ossuccio is also a gateway to **Isola Comacina** (3) and UNESCO-listed **Sacro Monte di Ossuccio**, 14 chapels leading to a hillside sanctuary. From its waterfront, the view is a snapshot of what makes Lake Como so alluring: the unassuming hamlets next to larger-than-life villas, and the green, wooded hills sloping down to the deep-blue water. In the distance, always in view, are the Alps. From the Roman Empire to modern-day Hollywood, it's a scene that's charmed through the ages. sacrimonti.org **ANGELA LOCATELLI**

HOW TO DO IT: Various airlines fly direct to Milan from UK cities including London, Manchester and Edinburgh (from 2h to 2h30m). From there, it takes around an hour to reach Como by taxi. Doubles at Albergo Terminus in Como from €277 (£237). albergoterminus.it

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3 ISOLA COMACINA

The lake's only island is mostly uninhabited, but its trails lead past olives, lindens and laurels, as well as houses for short-term artists in residence. Every June, the popular San Giovanni Festival reenacts a fire that devastated the island in the 12th century with a red-tinted firework display. isola-comacina.it

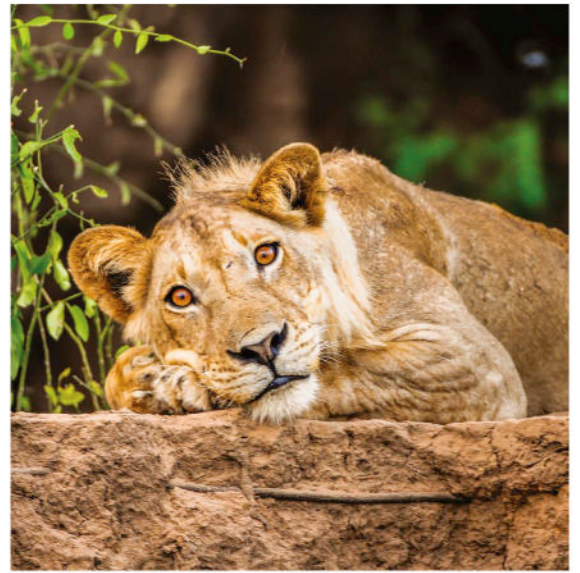
2 VILLA CARLOTTA

The 20-acre botanical garden of Villa Carlotta is a much-loved retreat on the lake. There are monumental trees, a citrus tunnel and a path among the ferns, but it's most famous for its azaleas, which bloom into full cushions of red, white and pink for a few weeks each May. villacarlotta.it

1 TEATRO SOCIALE

Como's 19th-century theatre has always had a special affinity with the opera. This summer, it'll join other venues across the country in marking 100 years since the death of Giacomo Puccini with an open-air production of *Turandot*, the composer's final masterpiece. teatrosocialecomo.it





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STAY AT HOME

SHERWOOD FOREST

Home to one of England's most-loved legends, this ancient woodland area is also a place for nature walks, mountain biking and pints in centuries-old pubs

Why go?

A patchwork of woodlands, rolling hills and storybook villages, Sherwood Forest is far more than Robin Hood's legendary hideout. An hour's drive north of Nottingham, the area is primed for outdoor pursuits with walking routes criss-crossing forests and farmland. References to Nottinghamshire's most famous outlaw can be found throughout the region, but it's the storied forest — now designated a 1,000-acre national nature reserve — that takes centre stage in any season. To explore the broader region, hire a car.

What to do

Once a royal hunting ground, the gnarly oak forest at Sherwood is one of the finest surviving ancient oak woodlands in the UK. Four trails, from under a mile to four miles long, wind past the 1,000-year-old Major Oak, which has been cited as Robin Hood's hideout. The 15,000-acre Welbeck Estate, located within Sherwood Forest and the seat of the Dukes of Portland, is another great hiking spot. Or browse the family's world-class art collection at The Portland Collection and next-door Harley Gallery for award-winning contemporary art exhibitions. A 15-minute-drive south, a vastly different landscape awaits at Sherwood Pines, where walking, running and mountain biking are all on offer. visitsherwood.co.uk MoreNewspageandukMagazines

Where to eat

All Welbeck Estate walks start and end in The Courtyard at Welbeck, where the Harley Café serves sandwiches, small plates and a hearty signature venison cobbler with horseradish and parmesan scones. The Hardwick Inn, a half-hour drive west, is a charming countryside pub in a restored 16th-century building, perfect for a Sunday roast. welbeckfarmshop.co.uk hardwickinn.co.uk

Don't miss

On a whistle-stop tour of Nottingham, visit Nottingham Castle to explore 1,000 years of history. Fronted by a Robin Hood statue, it hosts an exhibit about the outlaw's antics. Afterwards, head to Ye Olde Trip To Jerusalem, lauded as England's oldest surviving inn and once a stop for crusader knights. Pub classics are served in its dimly lit, medieval-style rooms. nottinghamcastle.org.uk greeneeking.co.uk

We like

Newstead Abbey is a former Augustinian priory-turned-private-residence, a 40-minute drive south of Sherwood Forest and the ancestral home of Lord Byron. Inside, the private apartments of the poet can be visited. In good weather, meander through some of the estate's 300 acres, incorporating formal gardens, ponds and waterfalls.



WHERE TO STAY

Overlooking rolling hills in the village of Welbeck, Holbeck Farm Barns consists of five holiday cottages that belong to the Welbeck Estate. Two are dog-friendly and all sleep four to eight people. The pick of the bunch is La Roche, which has a garden hot tub. Guests can also pre-order a breakfast hamper (£30) from the estate's farm shop. From £520 for a three-night break for up to six people in La Roche. welbeck.co.uk

Above: Major Oak in Sherwood Forest is the legendary hideout of Robin Hood

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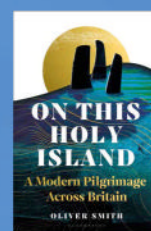
mountains. Accompanied by jaw-dropping astrophotography, the guide is packed with practical information and travel tips about night sky tours, in places often backed by showstopping scenery right here on Earth. *Lonely Planet, £19.99*



Wild Guide South West

The free-spirited guide to outdoor adventures, now in its second edition, is expanded to include Wiltshire, South Gloucestershire and Bristol in its

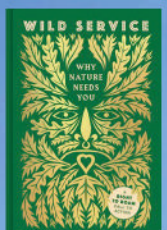
coverage. With 1,000 locations included, it shows us the best places to paddleboard, swim, canoe, wild camp, hike and bike, and has plenty of artisan food producers listed to stock up for picnics and campfire cookouts. *Wild Things Publishing, £18.99*



On this Holy Island: A Modern Pilgrimage Across Britain

Travel writer Oliver Smith journeys across Britain to reframe the idea of 'pilgrimage', from sacred travels made during the last Ice Age to 21st-century

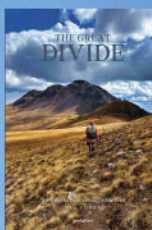
missions that end in football stadiums and festival sites. A celebration of spiritual travel, it sees the author explore remote sea caves, sleep inside Neolithic tombs, scale once-holy mountains and find peace among ancient standing stones. *Bloomsbury, £20*



Wild Service: Why Nature Needs You

A clarion cry for a mass reconnection with the British countryside, this book explores how our loss and nature's need are intertwined. Blending science, nature

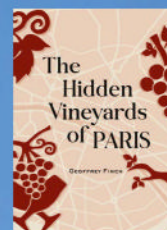
writing and philosophy from an array of experts, artists and writers, it encourages the reader to become a whistleblower against environmental destruction and shares inspiring stories of those defending our countryside. *Bloomsbury, £20*



The Great Divide

Adventurer Tim Voors tells us what it's like to walk the world's longest single national trail. Stretching 3,100 miles from the Mexican border to the Canadian border in Glacier National Park, the USA's

Continental Divide Trail (CDT) comes with 'brutal but beautiful' terrain. Tim expertly explains the challenges of long-distance hiking, offering practical tips, kit lists, maps and beautiful wilderness photography alongside riveting travelogue. *Gestalten, £30*



The Hidden Vineyards of Paris

Hit the backstreets of Paris to sleuth out hidden wineries and vineyards. Your guide is long-time Paris resident Geoffrey Finch, who has hosted

viticultural walking tours around the city for decades. Learn about the rise and fall of Paris and the Île de France, once the world's largest wine region and now home to a blossoming crop of small producers — if you know where to look. *Board and Bench Publishing, £18*

KIT LIST

TRAIN TRAVEL

Take to the tracks in comfort and style with these travel essentials for rail adventures



1 STUBBLE & CO ROLL TOP MINI BACKPACK

This compact 14-litre backpack is the perfect travel companion: soft enough to squish into tight compartments and comfortable to wear. The bag has a waterproof shell for all weathers, internal organisation spaces and a 13-inch laptop compartment. It's made of recycled, vegan-friendly materials and comes in nine colours. £100. stubbleandco.com

2 TRTL PILLOW PLUS

For a long journey without a lie-flat bed, this is the next best thing to support your head. Made from breathable mesh, with a fleecy outer layer and an adjustable internal support that can fit all heights, this ergonomic pillow looks more like a scarf. It's packable, with a water-resistant carry bag; machine washable; and comes in grey with black or blue accents. £80. trtltravel.com

3 JULY TECH KIT

Tech can be tricky to organise when you're on the move, with everything from camera cables to phone chargers cluttering up your bag. Enter this organiser from July, which keeps everything properly stowed inside a tough, translucent polycarbonate shell. It comes in yellow, blue, black or red, and can be personalised for an additional charge. £65. july.com

4 MONOS CARRY-ON PRO

Space can be tight on the tracks, so pack your belongings into a suitcase that is compact but still fits a lot in. This one from Monos has been designed to do just that. It's dent-resistant with vegan leather details, and features a front compartment to keep essentials safe. Inside, extras include an anti-microbial laundry bag, two shoe bags and a luggage tag. £110. monos.com

5 OUR PURE PLANET SIGNATURE BLUETOOTH HEADPHONES

The settings on these wireless, noise-cancelling headphones mean you can choose to block out sound, or allow ambient noise to filter through so you can hear station announcements. The battery lasts up to 35 hours. Each pair is carbon neutral and made with 80% recycled plastic. £144.99. ourpureplanet.com

6 ANKER 737 POWER BANK

Space beside a plug socket is never guaranteed, so you often need to rely on a portable battery to power your tech travel essentials. This tough little option from Anker, which has a hefty 24,000mAh cell capacity, can deliver up to five full charges to your phone, with two additional ports to charge other devices such as tablets or wireless headphones. A display shows how much is left. £55. anker.com

7 LOOP SWITCH

These three-in-one earplugs from Loop can block out any unwanted noise. Controlled by a mechanical dial, they can switch between maximum noise-cancellation to 'experience' and 'engage' modes, which take the edge off background noise to varying degrees. They're available in white, pink, blue and black, and come with a matching case. £55. loopearplugs.com

8 ALLBIRDS TREE RUNNERS

Comfort is key on train journeys, and these Allbirds trainers feel like slippers. They're available in various colours, so go with almost any outfit. Made from lightweight, breathable, FSC-certified eucalyptus, they feel cool and bouncy underfoot. The cushioned midsole is made using responsibly sourced sugarcane, while the laces are made from recycled cotton. £110. allbirds.co.uk



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A THREE-NIGHT BREAK TO NORTHWEST WALES

National Geographic Traveller (UK) has teamed up with Ffestiniog Travel to offer a heritage rail trip for two around the town of Porthmadog

THE DESTINATION

Sit back and watch northwest Wales roll by with the Ffestiniog & Welsh Highland Railways, which operates various local train services. Chief among them is the Mountain Spirit steam train, which links Porthmadog to Blaenau Ffestiniog. This unassuming town is part of the Slate Landscape of northwest Wales, a quarrying area that was awarded UNESCO World Heritage Site status in 2021. Another highlight is the Harbourmaster train, which passes at the foot of Yr Wyddfa (Mount Snowdon) in Eryri (Snowdonia) National Park as it travels from Porthmadog to Caernarfon.

THE PRIZE

To celebrate its 50th anniversary, rail tour specialist Ffestiniog Travel – a sister company of Ffestiniog & Welsh Highland Railways – is offering a reader and guest a three-night, mid-week break around Porthmadog. The winners will enjoy return Gold Class seats on the Mountain Spirit and Harbourmaster, complete with afternoon tea and a picnic hamper. Accommodation is included on a half-board basis in a twin or double room at four-star The Royal Sportsman Hotel, in Porthmadog. Blackout dates apply.

Ffestiniog Travel provides expert advice and worldwide trips, both escorted and tailor-made. It's part of a charitable trust; to date, it's donated over £1m to the Ffestiniog & Welsh Highland Railways, to preserve heritage railways around the world.



From top: Yr Wyddfa (Mount Snowdon), viewed from Llynau Mymbyr lake; Porthmadog Harbour; the Mountain Spirit steam train heading towards Porthmadog

TO ENTER

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NOTES FROM AN AUTHOR

JOHAN NYLANDER

Travelling with the herders of Mongolia's remote grasslands is a lesson in digital nomadism

It's been two days since we left the glittering skyscrapers and flashy hotels of downtown Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia's capital, and began our journey to the northeastern Khentii province — the birthplace of Chinggis (or Genghis) Khan, the founder of the Mongol Empire of the 13th and 14th centuries, the largest contiguous empire in history.

Driving through the Mongolian steppe, there are no roads to speak of, only sporadic tracks carved into the dirt by other vehicles. Out here, it's just open landscape, horses, cows, yaks and other animals roaming free. In the distance, nomadic *gers* (yurts) stand out like white dots in the vast rolling grassland.

The sun is about to set when we reach our destination, the home of a nomadic herder family. Standing outside their *ger*, the steppe seems to stretch endlessly in all directions, making the world feel bigger but also somehow simpler. It's only now that I feel I truly understand what they mean by the 'endless blue sky', a common epithet for the landlocked Northeast Asian nation. Mongolia is the second-least densely populated country in the world (after Greenland), with only two people per square kilometre. Given that more than half the population is crammed into the capital, the chances of running into another human being out on the steppe are remote.

My host, Batbayer, has a cheerful face, with deep creases and a leathery tan from long hours working outdoors, giving him the look of a sailor from an Ernest Hemingway novel. He lives with his wife, Enkhmaa, and together they tend livestock across the vast landscape.

We had pre-arranged our visit but travellers in Mongolia can drive up to pretty much any *ger* and feel welcomed to stay. You don't knock on the door: when approaching a nomadic family, a customary greeting is to utter a kindly "Hold your dog," even if you don't see a dog. Mongolia's nomads are among the most hospitable, friendly people I've ever met.

We feast at the family home on one of the country's most distinct and tasty dishes: *khorkhog*, or mutton cooked using hot rocks. This comes served with pickled cucumber, a variety of berries, and curdled milk — besides more plates of meat, all from the family's own livestock. A bowl of vodka is passed around to share and constantly topped up. At midnight — to my great surprise — our hosts fire up a karaoke machine.



to Kazakhstani pop hits and Mongolian love songs, played at full blast under the full moon.

Mongolia is home to one of the world's few remaining truly nomadic cultures. About a fifth of the population are herders, and nomadism is intricately woven into the country's spirit. But modern life is catching up with the people on the steppe at rapid speed. This is in large part what my book is about: an outsider's exploration of a society undergoing modernisation while trying to hold fast to its deeply rooted traditional values.

Batbayer's *ger* has a TV, a satellite dish and some digital devices, powered using solar panels and a diesel generator, clear signs that technological transitions are afoot in the daily lives of Mongolia's nomads. The sight of herders, on horses or camels, accessing the web or trading crypto via their smartphones is no longer as incongruous as it might sound.

Many of the livestock here, especially the more valuable breeds such as horses, camels and cattle, are implanted with microchips that can be monitored via satellite-based services. Herders are also increasingly using drones. Forget about today's footloose information workers: these are the real 'digital nomads'.

"I would like to use the internet more because it's fun and useful; but the animals like it here, this is a good place for them," Batbayer says when I ask if better internet connectivity might influence where to move his livestock next. "I would never choose Facebook over the wellbeing of the animals."

The following day, we continue our journey deeper into the steppe and closer to the birthplace of the great Khan, an almost religious place for many locals. Hours spent driving over rough terrain is unlikely to appeal to those with sensitive bums. But for me, getting to know Mongolia by leaving behind modern comforts, to spend time with nomads on the vast steppe, or in the depths of the Gobi Desert, is a way to see the world, and oneself, from a very different perspective. Travelling through — and writing about — Mongolia has been very much an inner journey for this city-dwelling Asia correspondent.

Johan Nylander is an *Asia Times* correspondent. His latest book, *The Wolf Economy Awakens: Mongolia's Fight for Democracy, and a Green and Digital Future*, is published by Hong Kong University Press, £20.

<https://t.me/share/wikipedia?share=JohanNylander>

“Technological transitions are afoot in the daily lives of Mongolia's nomads. The sight of herders, on horses or camels, accessing the web or trading crypto via their smartphones is no longer as incongruous as it might sound.”

MEET THE ADVENTURER

Justin Schneider

THE AMERICAN TOMB DIVER WAS AMONG THE FIRST TO SWIM BENEATH A PYRAMID IN REMOTE SUDAN, WHERE THE WATER GLITTERED WITH GOLD



You're one of just 16 people in the world to have dived beneath a pyramid. What led you there? Good luck, really. In 2018, American archaeologist Pearce Paul Creasman came into my dive shop in Phoenix, Arizona, with this crazy idea of excavating a flooded tomb beneath a pyramid in Nuri, a really remote part of Sudan. I'd already dived a lot of unusual places, so he asked me to start making a plan — thinking about everything from airflow to lighting and mapping — to help the team of underwater archaeologists that he had in mind to complete the project. A year later, he called me, explaining that they may have underestimated the challenge slightly, and he asked me to come along. “Can you be in Africa in a week?” he asked, and I was there.

What's the significance of the site? It's the resting place of King Nastasen, who ruled the Kingdom of Kush from 335 to around 315-310 BCE. The Kushites held sway over some 750 miles of territory in the Nile Valley, but there's still a lot we don't know about the area during that period. Our project, which is still ongoing, is critical to understanding the ancient kingdom, its environment and its people.

How does underwater excavation work? We bring in buckets and scoop up the contents of the chambers in mapped sections, then have additional divers stationed at intervals to send the buckets back above ground. We typically do two hour-long dives, six days a week, using surface-supplied air. **More on the subject in National Geographic Travel**

ease of movement. If we find something significant, we pack it in with clay or mud and seal it in a protective case. For preservation, we keep these artefacts underwater until they can be collected by a conservationist. In the case of the pyramid in Nuri, any artefacts belong to the Sudanese people, and we hope they will go to the museums in the capital, Khartoum.

For a lot of people, underwater archaeology will seem terrifying. What's the draw? It can be scary and uncomfortable. Often you have no way of knowing the depth, temperature, visibility and structural stability of the site in advance. It's dark and really disorienting, but if you can push the fear aside, you get to experience something no one else has. The first time we went into King Nastasen's tomb, we had crystal clear visibility — there was gold everywhere, and so much of it had degraded in the water that the whole place was glistening. Finding the sarcophagus in the third chamber was mind-blowing. We didn't even have to dig; it was right there. The last person to see it was alive in 300 BCE, and then there's me. It's crazy.

Where would you recommend for those wanting to experience underwater archaeological sites? Playa del Carmen in Mexico has a bit of everything. You can dive the cenotes [subterranean lakes] and experience Mayan history, as they were used for sacrificial offerings, and explore wrecks or head out on reef dives. Also worth considering is the Submerged Archaeological Park of Baia, Italy. You really feel like you're in ancient Italy, with mosaics and pillars and statues all around. Alternatively, the Second World War wrecks in the Middle East are epic. There's Jordan's Underwater Military Museum, where they've sunk helicopters, tanks — a whole host of military vehicles to explore. It's not ancient, but it's fascinating.

What qualifications do divers need to visit such sites? As a minimum, I'd say the PADI Advanced Open Water qualification, which allows you to dive almost anything within a recreational limit — up to 100ft deep. The PADI website has a list of dive shops at most destinations, as well as information on dive sites and depths.

Where's next on your list? The Dead Sea Diving Society, an off-shoot of the Pyramid Dive Club that I belong to, is looking at an archaeological site in the Dead Sea. It'd be the first time one has been excavated there and, like Sudan, the lake poses its own challenges. The high salt concentration affects buoyancy and makes diving tough, so logistically, it's a nightmare — but we don't want things to be easy.

INTERVIEW: MEGAN HUGHES

Justin Schneider runs Salt & Sea Scuba in Phoenix, Arizona.

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WHAT'S ONLINE

HOW TO PLAN A FAMILY CITY BREAK TO BERLIN

With attractions designed for teens, tweens and toddlers, as well as adult spaces that welcome kids, the German capital is a fantastic destination for families. Words: Christie Dietz

It's not hard to see how welcoming Berlin is to families. There are kid-orientated cafes and imaginatively themed playgrounds. Parks and woodlands provide plentiful picnicking opportunities and, in hot weather, lakes offer sunbathing or ankle-deep splashing about. And beer gardens are a failsafe option for simple snacks.

Getting around is easy, too. The city's neighbourhoods are walkable, and its public transport network efficient and cheap. Its wide, flat streets, bike lanes and family-friendly cycle hire make two wheels a great way to explore while taking in the city's impressive sights — all of which make Berlin a memorable family destination.

What to do with toddlers

A popular neighbourhood with families, Prenzlauer Berg has playgrounds, parks and pretty streets with shops selling kids' clothes and toys, as well as family-friendly cafes. For the musically inclined, the Frank Gehry-designed concert hall at the Barenboim-Said Academy hosts morning concerts for babies under 12 months and afternoon concerts for one- to five-year-olds. Meanwhile, central Tiergarten is a wonderful spot for walking, picnicking or kicking a ball in the grass; wander through the woods, spotting cultural sights and memorials. Of the park's six playgrounds, the one close to Thomas-Dehler-Strasse is best equipped for toddlers.

What to do with tweens and teenagers

The Deutsches Technikmuseum will absorb transport and technology fans for hours, with highlights including a hall of vintage locomotives and a simulator that lets future sea captains steer their ship into port. For those ready to learn about the darkest chapter of German history, the Topography of Terror museum is located on the site of the former SS and Gestapo headquarters. Checkpoint Charlie is a few minutes' walk away and the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe can be reached in around 20 minutes on foot. To experience a little of Berlin's alternative side, Bearpit Karaoke is held on Sundays at Mauerpark. **READ MORE ONLINE**

TOP STORIES

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THE SECRET HISTORY OF SICILIAN CANNOLI

DATING BACK TO THE MIDDLE AGES, THE ITALIAN ISLAND'S SIGNATURE SWEETS HAVE SURPRISINGLY BAWDY ORIGINS. WORDS: JODIE BOND

Sicily's emblematic dessert has captured palates worldwide, and there's also a fascinating story behind its shape. It's thought cannoli have been around since the Middle Ages, with some accounts suggesting they were first made while Sicily was under Arab rule.

One legend has it they were invented in the ninth century by a harem. The women would prepare sweet treats to pass the time during the groom's absence, and they're said to have crafted cannoli — phallic in shape — to honour their emir's virility.

Following the island's conversion to Catholicism in the 11th century, the production of cannoli became synonymous with monasteries and convents. Their recipe was preserved by nuns who'd prepare them

for special occasions and religious festivals — a tradition that dates to Ancient Greece, when the consumption of suggestive foods was associated with celebrating fertility and fostering a connection with the divine.

Over the centuries, the nuns secretly passed their baking techniques down the generations. Since the 14th century, they started producing sweet treats in their *dolceria* ('sweet shop') to be sold to Palermo's aristocracy. In the late 1980s, only two *dolcerias* were still actively baking in the city and, after the last nuns left in 2014, the tradition was at risk of being lost. Maria Oliveri, an expert in cultural heritage studies, took it upon herself to preserve the tradition of monastic baking.

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BEYOND THE TRAVEL SECTION



I ANIMALS I

Here's how whales can sing underwater without drowning

Scientists have long wondered how baleen whales can sing while holding their breath underwater. New insights into their anatomy have now solved the mystery. natgeo.com/animals

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The plastic pollution crisis

It's become one of the world's most pressing environmental issues. Much of the planet is swimming in discarded plastic, which is harming animal and possibly human health. Can this crisis ever be solved? natgeo.com/science

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Why daylight saving time exists — and why it's so controversial

The idea behind the clock shift, often called daylight saving time, is to maximise sunlight in the Northern Hemisphere. But people have long argued over its benefits. natgeo.com/history



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CULTURE

Film-inspired travels

The perks — and pitfalls — of letting TV and movies inspire your trips, a trend known as self-guided travel.



TRADITIONS

Bali's day of silence

A new museum explores Nyepi, when work, travel and the use of modern technology are banned.



HISTORY

Los Angeles' movie theatres

These historic cinemas offer an intimate glimpse into a city famous for its film industry.

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WEEKENDER

LE MANS & AROUND

Le Mans may be best known for its 24-hour car race but the French city offers more than high-speed thrills. Explore its old town then venture into the Loire Valley for canoe trips and chateaux stays. Words: Adrian Phillips

To most people, 'Le Mans' means racing cars. For over a century, this medieval city in the Loire region of northwest France has hosted the annual 24 Hours of Le Mans, an iconic rally around the Circuit de la Sarthe that's as much a test of stamina as speed. You'll find plenty of nods here to this rich motoring history, from postcards of classic Aston Martins to a dedicated museum that displays numerous race cars.

But you don't need to be a petrolhead to fall in love with Le Mans; it's a place with the most evocative of ancient centres, featuring cobbled

alleys, some of the world's best-preserved Roman walls and a blockbuster of a cathedral with beautiful stained glass. There are both intimate restaurants and busy al fresco bars by the river where you can take a bench seat and soak up the atmosphere. And Le Mans is a springboard to much more besides, from the pottery centre of Malicorne and the rustic charm of the Mancelles Alpes area to the royal city of Loches. And all this can be reached flight-free, with the train journey from St Pancras International taking just four-and-a-half hours.

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An alley in Le Mans, parts of which date to the 11th century
Left: Le Grand-Pressigny Prehistory Museum, near the city of Loches

TOP FIVE Characterful places to stay

LA MAISON DU GASSEAU

A blue-grey stone chateau with green shutters in the Mancelles Alpes, this place was built as a family home in 1939 and now offers six guest rooms with exposed beams and wooden floors. The breakfast features freshly baked scones, local honey and home-churned butter. laimaisondugasseau.com

DOMAINE DE L'ÉPAU

With grass rolling over their roofs, the six eco-lodges here look like Hobbit homes buried in the landscape. The interiors are unfussy and modern, with terraces perfect for an evening tipple. Kitchenettes mean you can self-cater but the complex also has a bar and restaurant. domainedelepau.com

MONTMIRAIL CASTLE

Parts of this castle, standing proud between Le Mans and Chartres, date back to the 12th century. Its guest rooms brim with a sense of history, and each is individually decorated with heritage features such as four-poster beds and elegant wood panelling. chateaudumontmirail.com

AVENTURE NAUTIQUE

Set on the banks of the River Sarthe in Roëzé-sur-Sarthe, Aventure Nautique has 10 bell tents that allow full but comfortable immersion in nature. Hire one of the site's paddleboards or electric boats for a river adventure then kick back with a mojito at the characterful bar set in a shack. aventurenautique.fr

MAISON COURTIN

In La Chartre-sur-le-Loire, Maison Courtin is owned and run by Grégoire Courtin, who rents out a couple of guest rooms furnished in 19th-century style. He's also the proprietor of the adjacent brush shop and homeware museum and will gladly give you a tour of his hoard of curiosities, ranging from model Aston Martins to 18th-century medical instruments. maisoncourtin.com

DAY ONE RIVER TRAILS & OLD TOWN STROLLS

Morning

Le Mans can wait – start your day with a 20-mile drive south west to Malicorne-sur-Sarthe. The pretty town, with its 12th-century church and watermills, has been a heartland of French earthenware since the 18th century. Set in a former ceramics factory, the Malicorne Museum of Earthenware and Ceramics lets you try your hand at pottery-making and browse displays of earthenware, from tobacco jars to white Malicorne ducks with yellow feet. Down the road, Boutique Métiers d'Art sells the work of local artisans, including potters and jewellers. Have lunch at quirky Salon Arthé (7 Place de la République), run by painter Katrin Ehlers, with its dining room-cum-studio full of easels and canvases. musee-faience.fr malicorne.com 4a-de-malicorne.fr

Afternoon

On the way back to Le Mans, stop at Roëzé-sur Sarthe to enjoy a riverboat ride. Nautical Adventure rents out watercraft including electric boats, so spend an hour looking for kingfishers on this peaceful stretch of water. After that, crank up the pace at the Motor Museum of the 24 Hours of Le Mans. It showcases 140 racing cars and reveals the history of the epic race with fascinating archive footage. Its Heroes' Alley tells the tales of individuals who have made special contributions over the years, focusing not only on the drivers but also the engineers who play such a key role in getting the cars across the finish line in the endurance race. You can take a tour of the circuit, too. aventurenautique.fr

Evening

Arrange an evening tour of Le Mans old town with tour guide Nathalie Jupin (nathalie.jupin@lemans.fr). You'll stop at the town hall that was once the palace of Matilda, granddaughter of William the Conqueror, who gave birth here to the future King Henry II of England, and at the Cathedral of Saint Julian of Le Mans, home to a 12th-century stained-glass window. Equally engaging are the town's smaller details, such as the stone obelisks on street corners that once protected buildings from carriage wheels and the fourth-century arch that leads to a section of Roman wall. Wrap up the day with a meal of veal steak and heritage vegetables at the intimate, wood-beamed Bistrot des Gourmets bistrotdegourmets.com



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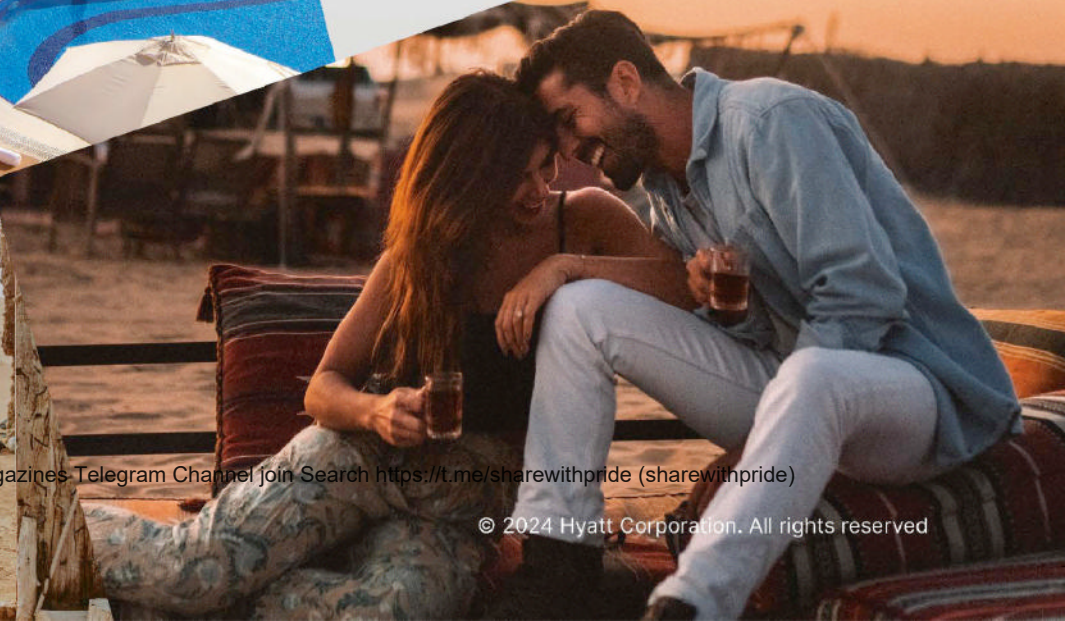
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Below from left: Rillettes, a classic dish from the region; local produce at La Maison du Gasseau

TOP THREE Regional produce



RILLETTES

A pâté of shredded pork cooked in fat that's typically smothered on toast, *rillettes* originated in nearby Touraine but became associated with Le Mans when a local started selling it to passengers passing through on the train. There are several annual celebrations of the speciality, including the annual Spring of Rillettes festival held in Sarthe.

CHENIN BLANC

One of the Loire's wine-producing areas in the south of Sarthe, Jasnieres is well worth a look. Its Chenin Blanc wines date to the Middle Ages when they were made by Cistercian monks. They range from dry to fiercely sweet. Try them at the Domaine des Gaudetieries winery in Ruillé-sur-Loir.

SABLÉ BISCUITS

The classic Sablé biscuit, a crimp-edged shortbread, is thought to have originated during the 17th century in Sablé-sur-Sarthe. Named after the French word for 'sandy', there are both sweet (orange, lemon, almond) and savoury (green pepper, parmesan) versions. Take a tour of the Biscuiterie La Sablésienne biscuit factory, in operation since 1962. [sablesienne.com](https://www.sablesienne.com)

DAY TWO CANOPY CLIMBS & ABBEY VISITS

Morning

Drive 40 minutes north to the Mancelles Alpes, a region of wooded hills, jagged cliffs and charming villages that follows the valley of the River Sarthe. You can take to the river once more, this time in a canoe or kayak rented from Préférence Plein-Air, just outside the Camping du Sans Souci site in the village of Fresnay-sur-Sarthe. Alternatively, don a safety harness and try a spot of tree climbing in the commune of St Léonard-des-Bois. Parc Aventures du Gasseau has constructed a series of rope walkways, tunnels and swings among the oak trees in the grounds of its restaurant, La Maison du Gasseau. Afterwards, enjoy a lunch made from organic, local produce on the atmospheric terrace of the chateau. preferencepleinair.com parc-aventures-du-gasseau.com lamaisondugasseau.com

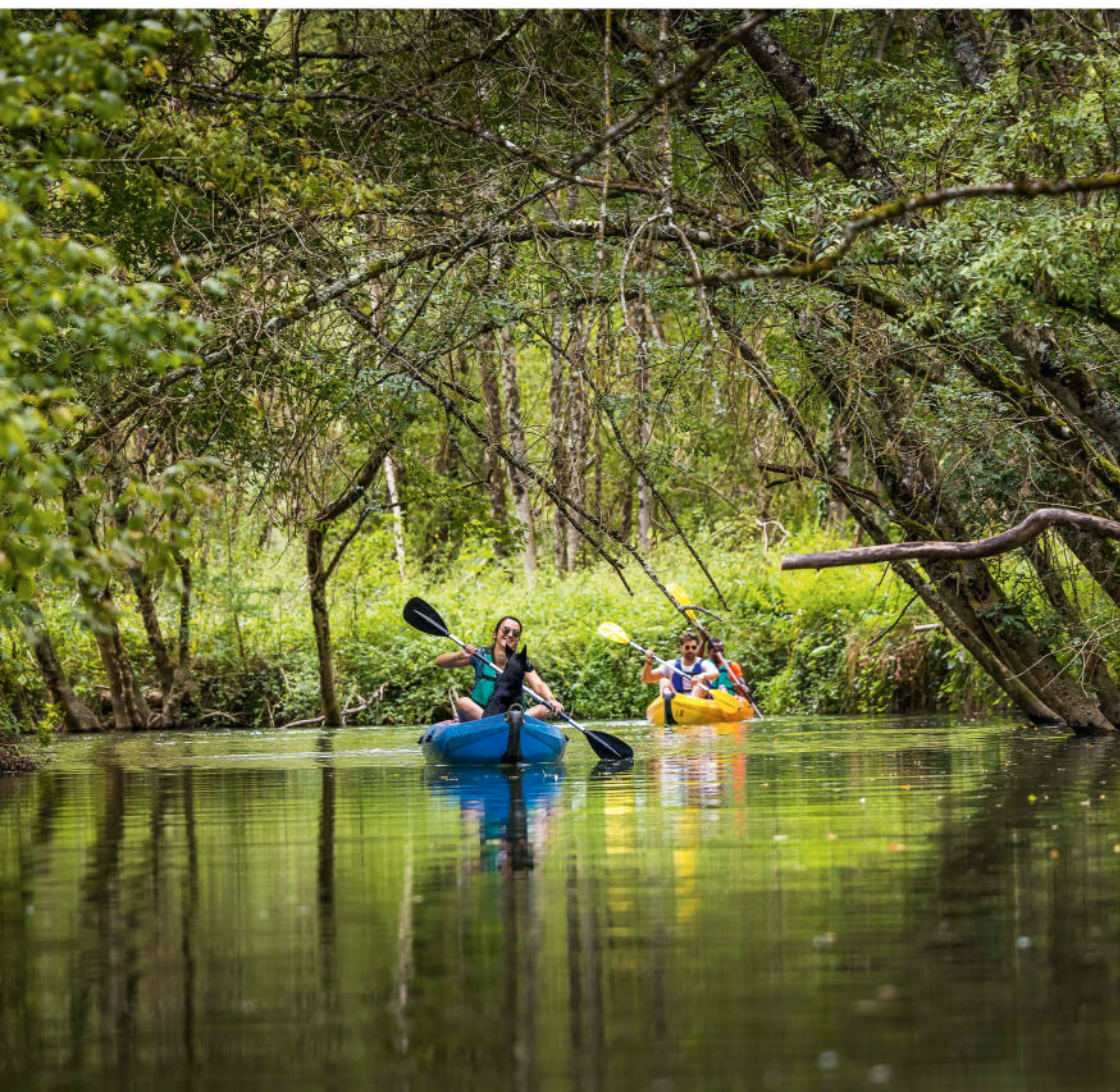
Afternoon

Heading back to Le Mans, make a stop 10 minutes from the centre at the L'Épau Abbey. This Cistercian complex was founded in 1229 by the English queen Berengaria of Navarre, widow of Richard the Lionheart, who'd been killed in battle 30 years earlier. A skeleton discovered in the abbey church in the 1960s is thought to be hers and has since been reunited with her tombstone here. You get a real feel for monastic life as you explore, calling in at the dormitory, where the monks slept on mats on the floor; the *scriptorium*, where they copied manuscripts; and the church, where they prayed eight times a day. Afterwards, take a walk through the Arch of Nature, a two-square-mile reserve that abuts the abbey grounds and includes a nature trail featuring artworks inspired by local wildlife. epau.sarthe.fr arche-nature.fr

Evening

Dinner is in Le Mans at Brasserie Madeleine (7 Place des Jacobins), a family-run restaurant in a square overlooking the cathedral. It serves a good selection of seafood dishes – lobster, oysters, mussels and more – and a fabulously creamy *rilette* on thick pieces of toast. Then it's time for La Nuit des Chimères, a free light show. At sundown every day in summer, more than 20 of the city's buildings, walls and trees are illuminated with colourful images, from fairytale characters and historical symbols to portraits of locals who've made a special contribution to life here. The tourist office has a map with a walking route that takes in the illuminations. Round off the evening with a drink at Guingette des Tanneries (Square des Tanneries, Quai Louis Blanc), a relaxed riverside restaurant. nuitdeschimeres.fr





Road runner

Le Mans gave rise to one of the world's first cars. It was here in 1873 that inventor Amédée Bollée built L'Obéissante, a steam-powered vehicle with a heady 25mph top speed. It took him 18 hours to make the maiden, 140-mile drive from Le Mans to Paris.

Left: A canoe trip along a quiet stretch of the Indre River near Loches

GO FURTHER LOCHES

Located in the Indre-et-Loire department, 90 minutes' drive south east of Le Mans, the pretty medieval city of Loches is well worth an excursion for castle visits, canoe trips and cycling tours

Château de Loches and the Donjon

The royal city of Loches is dominated by its elevated medieval royal quarter, surrounded by a fortified wall and featuring Charles VII's royal residence, famously visited by Joan of Arc in 1429. Most impressive of all is the Donjon, an 11th-century castle tower containing dungeons etched with the graffiti of unfortunate former captives. The castle has a varied royal history that includes occupation by the one-time king of England, Richard the Lionheart, in the 12th century. Visitors are issued with interactive tablets that bring the past to life by showing how each of the rooms would have looked in its prime.

citeroyaleloches.fr

Cultu'raids Concept

The city sits on the Indre River, an idyllic tributary of the Loire. You can gain a deeper appreciation of it by renting a canoe from Cultu'raids Concept, which has a base near the centre. From here, you can explore a quiet stretch of the water, allowing you to feel a world away from civilisation. The river is narrow and shallow, winding through a tunnel of overhanging trees. One option is to paddle five miles to the watermill at St Jean, perhaps escorted by grey wagtails, flashing yellow as they flit from stone to stone on the river bed. If you're lucky, you might catch a glimpse of red deer through the branches on the banks. You can also rent standup paddleboards from the company.

culturaids.com

Green Route

A 35-minute drive south west of Loches is the village of Abilly, where you can rent bikes and e-bikes at Les Vélos de Paulette (8 Avenue des Termelles) and join the Green Route, a relaxing cycle path through woodland and fields of sunflowers. After five miles, a road takes you uphill through the village of Le Grand-Pressigny to a 12th-century chateau – guarded by a large model of a woolly mammoth – that now houses a museum of prehistory. Returning to Loches, if you wish to stay overnight, check in to the Hôtel de la Cité Royale, housed in the 19th-century Palais of Justice. Its terrace has views over the city's castle and church.

prehistoiregrandpressigny.fr

hotelelchite.com

HOW TO DO IT

Take the Eurostar from St Pancras International to Lille-Europe, from where there are direct connections to Le Mans, or to Paris Gare du Nord before taking the Métro to Paris Montparnasse for trains to Le Mans. Several car rental companies have offices at Le Mans station, including Avis. Alternatively, take your own car by ferry or via the Channel Tunnel; it's a four-hour drive from Calais.

eurostar.com avis.co.uk
eurotunnel.com

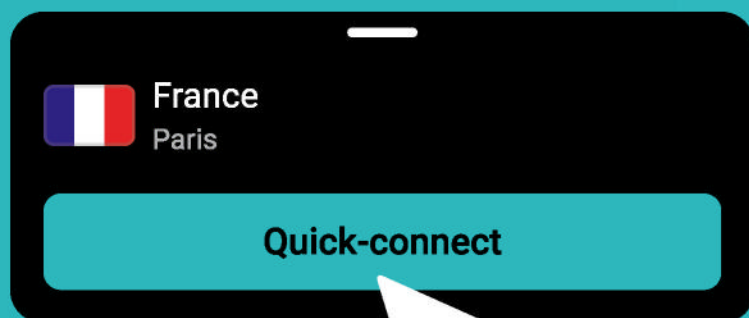
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EAT FEZ

The history of this imperial city is intertwined with many of Morocco's greatest food traditions — a tour of its vast medieval medina can lead to centuries-old recipes, but also local wines and experimental kitchens

WORDS: LORNA PARKES

"You need to be in a relaxed mood to make couscous," says chef Nezha Bouayadi, hair neatly tucked into her black hijab. Arabic R&B music echoes around the walled patio of The Ruined Garden, a restaurant in Fez that champions local Fassi food culture. Like many businesses in the city's eighth-century medina, this leafy patio restaurant is hard to find, but the successful are rewarded with dishes that rarely make it onto menus — and the chance to see couscous made from scratch every Friday.

Nezha massages grains of semolina through a fine wooden sieve. Then, alternating between fingertips and palms, she instinctively adds splashes of water and flour, rolling the grains around a rough basket until she's got that couscous texture. Some 20 minutes later, it's ready to be steamed and plated with saffron-flecked roast pumpkin and courgette, then scattered with sticky caramelised raisins and marinated chickpeas. The couscous is as light as air, absorbing all the rich sweet-savoury juices.

Nezha learnt to roll couscous when she was 16, in preparation for getting married. While the dish remains a Friday lunch staple — part of weekly holy day rituals — few Fez households still make it at home this way; most opt to buy bags in shops and markets.

While times change, tradition is not taken lightly in Fez's medina. On first appearances,

in the world looks little different to how it was a millennium ago. Along thousands of tiny medieval alleyways, whose mud-packed walls are propped up by wooden beams, artisans hammer, polish and paint in cubbyhole shops. Founded by Moulay Idriss — a descendant of the prophet Muhammad — Fez is considered Morocco's spiritual and cultural heartland. Unlike in Marrakech, where many souks now cater to travellers, Fassis still come out in force to do their shopping here on Saturdays.

"Everything you see is local, seasonal and brought to the market this morning," says Loubna El Bouchikhi the next day, on a tour of Fez's *kissaria* — covered markets where we're buying ingredients for her cooking class. Negotiating laden donkeys and hand-pulled carts, we pass tables of coriander and parsley before turning into another section where a sea of olives glistens under naked bulbs. In keeping with tradition, everything in the market is halal, and different alleys are dedicated to specific foods — like ancient supermarket aisles.

We arrive at Fez Cooking School later in the day, as muezzins are announcing the *adhan* (call to prayer) from a mountainside bristling with minarets and Imperial tombs. The school is set on the rooftop of an 18th-century merchant's house-turned-hotel called Palais Amani, built by a family who grew wealthy trading goods

Clockwise from top left: The honeycomb rooftops of Fez medina with the Kairaouine mosque minaret; Moroccan tagines in a souk; thin warka bread with pomegranates at Nur; chef Nezha Bouayadi rolls couscous at The Ruined Garden restaurant

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Chef Houssam preparing to cook at Fez Cooking School
Right: Squid ceviche at Nur

A TASTE OF Fez



NUR

The food at this fusion medina restaurant is as cutting-edge as its off-the-wall monochrome decor. The menu by Spanish-Moroccan chef Najat Kaanache offers an eclectic mix of dishes, from calamari with lemongrass broth to duck with artichoke, truffle and Moroccan spices. Tasting menus from US\$80 (£63) per person, excluding wine. nurfez.com

ABDULLAH'S TEA STALL

Affable Abdullah Touati has run a tea counter in Fez medina since 1969, just off the metal-workers' Place Seffarine. He uses a blend of herbs — peppermint, spearmint, sage, marjoram, absinthe and lemon verbena — grown behind his house on the edge of the city. It's served to locals and travellers at low plastic stools piled with cushions. 10 MAD (80p) a glass.

FONDOUK BAZAAR

Paper lanterns lead up to inviting roof terraces at this contemporary Moroccan cafe-restaurant above the ancient medina thoroughfare of Talaa Kebira. Popular with young Fassis, the menu runs from dishes such as shakshuka to tagliatelle with feta and olives. The orange-blossom and cinnamon lassi tastes like Morocco in a glass. 175 MAD (£14) for three courses. facebook.com/fondoukbazaarfes

BISSARA SOUP STANDS

In the Al Aachabin food section of Fez el Bali medina, split-pea soup is made the traditional way, the peas slow-cooked and smashed with a long wooden pole akin to a baseball bat. Popular at breakfast, it's served with olive oil and ground cumin. (sharewithpride)

"Fez is like a melting pot," says Loubna, as we stand charring aubergines on an open flame to make *zaalouk* — a dip similar to baba ganoush that she says was brought to Morocco by Sephardic Jews. Considered holy by Arabs, Fez was the first Moroccan city to establish a *mellah* — Jewish quarter — in the 15th century, in response to southern Spain's Jewish expulsion. This ancient mixing of cultures is at least partly responsible for Fez's reputation as the birthplace of many of Morocco's signature dishes — pastillas and tagines among them.

"When the Sephardic Jewish people came to Morocco, they brought a lot of cooking techniques," explains Loubna. Among them were the processing of olives and pickling of vegetables, along with the recipes for pastillas — pies stuffed with cinnamon and meats such as pigeon, dusted with icing sugar. "That combination of sweet and savoury is 100% Sephardic origin," she says.

Tagines and pastillas are ubiquitous on Moroccan tourist menus, but this evening they're refreshingly absent at Nur fine-dining restaurant. "We have no pork, no bread, no couscous and no tagine!" says chef-owner Najat Kaanache, ushering me into the kitchen. Najat tells me she's been doing a photo shoot for her next cookbook, so she's dressed not in chef's whites but a richly coloured kaftan that gives her the air of a Moroccan princess. (sharewithpride)

That impression of an artist at work follows through onto the plate, in all nine beautiful courses, beginning with tiny seaweed tacos of white fish and wakame. Najat's take on *zaalouk* follows, with homemade Worcestershire sauce and deliciously crisp tentacles of fried octopus, with a finale of Moroccan *halba* cake made with fenugreek.

Najat is a remarkable woman. Raised in a simple house near San Sebastian, northern Spain, she went to university in London, and worked with chef Ferran Adrià at El Bulli, where she met Anthony Bourdain, who put her on CNN. She's also filmed a food documentary for National Geographic with Gordon Ramsay in the Taza mountains north of Fez, where her family are from. Returning to her roots, she opened her first Moroccan restaurant, Nur, in 2017. Two years later the Fez establishment had earned a spot on the World's 50 Best Restaurants list.

Inspired by Nur's exclusively Moroccan wine list, I head to the rooftop bar at hotel Riad Fes, one of the medina's highest vantage points. Up here, across a patchwork of flat-roofed dwellings, I can single out two of Morocco's holiest sites: the pea-green pyramid roof of Moulay Idriss's mausoleum, and the tall minaret tower of Kairaouine mosque and university, established in 859

More Moroccan food and drink inspiration on the blog. <https://sharewithpride.com>

Right: The roof terrace at Palais Amani riad hotel, with views of the Fez medina
Below: Deep-fried sfenj — Moroccan doughnuts — are sold on the streets



FIVE FOOD FINDS

1

SFENJ

Morocco's take on a doughnut — drizzled in honey or stuffed with meat — is deep-fried on street corners in medinas across the country.

2

KHLI

Sun-dried preserved meat steeped in beef or lamb fat. Traditionally eaten at breakfast, it's sometimes stuffed into a flaky Moroccan bread called *msemen*.

3

SMEN

This fermented butter, so pungent it can taste like parmesan, punches up flavours in everything from tagines to eggs.

4

MAAKOUDA

Dumpling, beignet, fritter... call it what you will, this deep-fried mashed-potato snack is a popular street food in the medina.

5

TRID

This fine pastry, stretched onto heated metal globes in Fez medina, is torn up and dipped in jam and butter as a snack, or steamed as part of the dish *chicken*.



While alcohol is forbidden in Islam, Morocco's winemaking heartland has nevertheless thrived around the country's most sacred city, originating in vineyards established during the French protectorate era (1912-1956). Restaurants and hotels like Riad Fes are champions of local wineries such as Chateau Roslane, whose complex signature Cabernet Merlot is the standout of the five I try, including a Sauvignon Blanc-Chardonnay blend grown close to the UNESCO-listed Roman ruins of Volubilis nearby, a 'gris' dry rosé blush from Meknes and a peppery Syrah made near Casablanca.

Ready for dinner, I head back to the medina where queues are starting to form at snack vendors along the ancient main street of Talaa Kebira. The throaty call of a drum guides me to an alleyway so dark I'm half convinced I'm lost. But this is the entrance to Cafe Clock. When Brit Mike Richardson opened this cultural hub in 2007, after a London career in hospitality that included time at The Wolseley, he wanted to create a bridge between travellers and the local community. Today, 40% of the cafe's footfall is Moroccan — which is no mean feat for a foreign-owned business in Fez. Mike has since opened Clocks in Marrakech and Chefchaouen, but the original — which plays host to a cinema, art exhibitions and regular

I nab the last seat as a group of musicians in white *djellabas* (robes) warm up instruments for an *aissawa* performance showcasing a celebratory form of call and response music from the nearby Middle Atlas mountains. People are drinking tea and milkshakes amid chatter in *Darija*, Morocco's Arabic dialect, and I order Cafe Clock's signature dish: the camel burger.

Lean, nutritious and with its origins steeped in traditions of nomadic Arabic desert culture, camel meat is still sold along Talaa Kebira today — but it's typically only eaten by Moroccans at celebrations. As I wait for food, the cafe feels like it's gearing up for a fittingly raucous shindig. The burger arrives, patties piled high with gherkins and homemade tomato and cinnamon ketchup, just as the drumming picks up pace. It's an unusual taste: gamey, but light. Around me, hands start to twirl, heads bob, people clear their throats to sing. And so, the beat goes on, as it has in Fez for a millennium — just with a few new rhythms. **D**

HOW TO DO IT: Ryanair is the only airline that flies direct to Fez from the UK, with twice-weekly departures from Stansted. Stays at the 21-room Palais Amani riad hotel, home to Fez Cooking School, start from €196 (£167) per night, B&B; market tours with cooking classes cost €165 (£141) per person.

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SLEEP

TOKYO



With its glinting skyscrapers, narrow alleyways, lantern-festooned temples and neon-clad arcades, Tokyo is one of the most diverse and thrilling cities on Earth — but its sheer size can make choosing a hotel daunting. Over the past decade, accommodation options have broadened to include trendy *ryokans* (traditional inns) and indie hotels. Because there's no single city 'centre' in the Japanese capital, you'll almost certainly have to do some travelling — likely on the efficient metro system — to see its highlights, so don't get overly hung up on location. Instead, think about what's more important after a day's sightseeing: an al fresco pool or a cool in-house bar.

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Best for cultural immersion

£££ HOSHINOYA TOKYO

Leave the city, and your shoes, behind as you step onto the tatami floors of this skyscraper *ryokan*. It's a low-lit retreat of *shoji* screen doors and incense-scented air, with a second-floor lobby that includes a little salon for tea ceremonies. The 84 rooms are spread across the next 14 floors, with each level centred around a traditional *ochanoma* lounge serving teas, sake and house-made snacks. The rooms themselves are plush, with raised-platform futon beds, deep-soak tubs and jersey kimono-style pyjamas. An immense 17th-floor onsen-spa has hot spring waters pumped in from 5,000ft below the city streets, with a vaulted roof that leaves it part-open to the elements. The 10-table basement restaurant serves exquisite French-Japanese tasting menus and the in-room bento box breakfasts are highly recommended.

ROOMS: From ¥112,000 (£589), two-night

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Best on a budget

£ OMO5 TOKYO OTSUKA

In a skyscraper-cluttered metropolis, a hotel with an intimate, neighbourhood vibe can be a rare thing. Yet this branch of cool, affordable chain Omo, by Hoshino Resorts, has just that, packaged up in a modern building in the northern district of Otsuka. Cleverly designed rooms make the most of every square inch, with loft-style beds suspended above tatami mat seating areas and storage space integrated into walls and stairs. There's also a laundry room on the fifth floor, where guests can wash and dry clothes for just a few quid, and an all-day cafe that transitions from breakfast space to coffeeshop to bar as the day progresses. Sign up for a local tour with one of the dedicated 'Omo Rangers', who will take you around the excellent local tempura and ramen shops — or even on an Otsuka bar crawl.

ROOMS: From ¥16,000 (£84). omo-hotels.com

Best for loft-style cool

££ TRUNK (HOTEL) CAT STREET

This felt like an entirely new concept in Tokyo when it first opened in 2017: a design-forward boutique hotel with universally appealing NYC-style coolness. Seven years on, the concept has now been copied many times in the city, but it's still hard to top the original in the shopping area of Shibuya, just off Cat Street. Its lounge, restaurants and shop attract fashionable Tokyoites as much as hotel guests, and its bedrooms come with a breezy, minimalist aesthetic. Some have balconies with hammocks while larger options, like the Dining Suite, include spaces such as a kitchen area or terrace. Don't be surprised to see dapper couples heading for the rooftop; it's a popular venue for city weddings.

ROOMS: From ¥51,774 (£273). catstreet.trunk-hotel.com

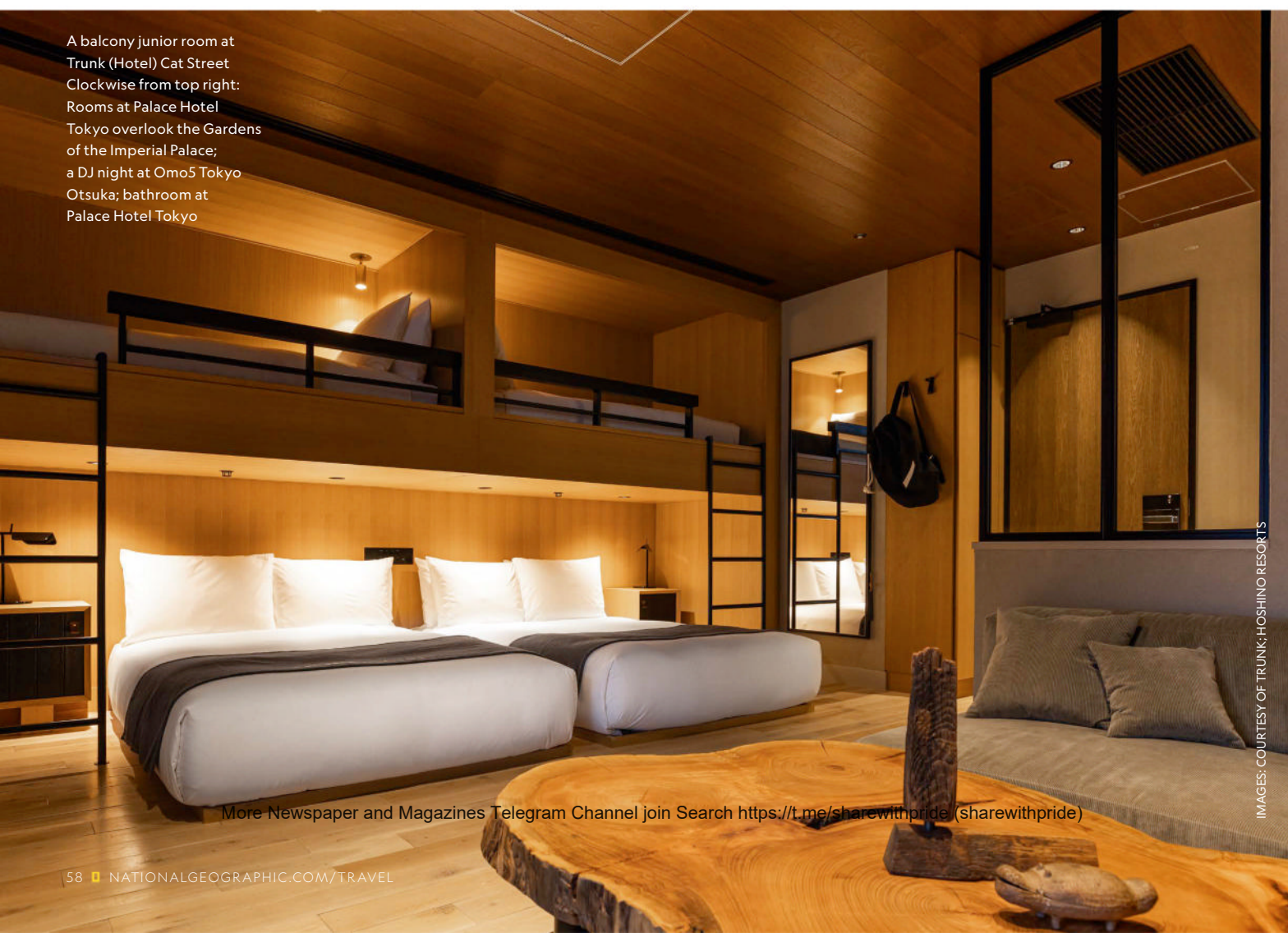
Best for royal luxury

£££ PALACE HOTEL TOKYO

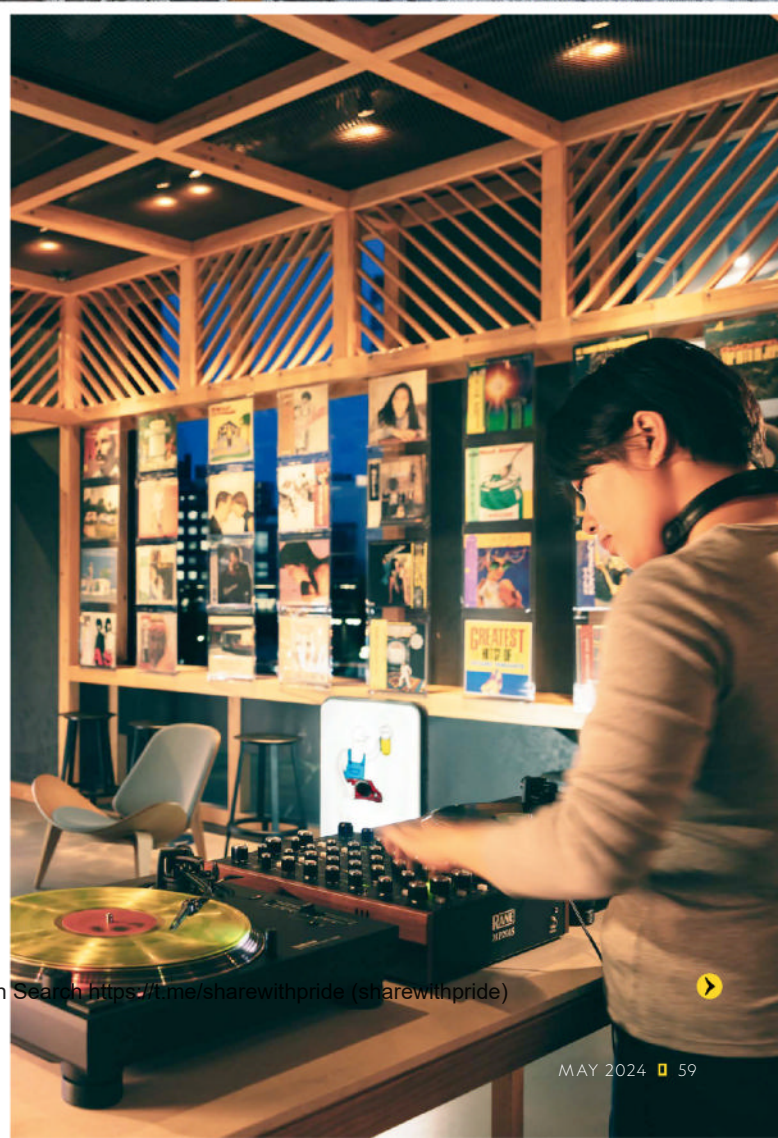
This elegant hotel in Otemachi has long been a favourite with well-heeled Tokyoites who come for the dining options and spa. It helps that it's mere steps away from the Imperial Palace, the city's most exclusive address, and close to the swish shops of the upmarket Ginza district. Good-sized rooms — some of them featuring balconies — overlook an expanse of moat-carved gardens. An extensive breakfast buffet has princely appeal thanks to elegant platings of grilled fish, pickled plums, rice and miso soup; if that's not to your taste, there's eggs benedict and croissants, too. The in-house restaurants also have the wow factor, with two Michelin-starred options: French-inspired Esterre, in partnership with Ducasse Paris, and Chinese-focused Amber Palace.

ROOMS: From ¥91,800 (£483). palacehoteltokyo.com

A balcony junior room at Trunk (Hotel) Cat Street
Clockwise from top right:
Rooms at Palace Hotel Tokyo overlook the Gardens of the Imperial Palace; a DJ night at Omo5 Tokyo Otsuka; bathroom at Palace Hotel Tokyo



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For more information and reservations, please contact:

info@goldenexperiences.com

Best for solo travellers

£ ONE@TOKYO

In the east of the city, a 10-minute walk from the Tokyo Skytree observatory tower, One@Tokyo has a high-profile pedigree for a budget hotel, having been designed by Japanese starchitect Kengo Kuma. Functional yet not austere, its communal spaces — from the open lobby to the greenery-dotted rooftop — fuse industrial metallics with warm woods and a palette of unfussy greys. With their friendly price point and compact footprint, the lead-in standard semi-double rooms are perfect for solo travellers who want a step up in comfort and privacy from one of the city's legendary capsule hotels. Long-stay discounts apply when booking for five nights, making it a perfect base if you're planning day trips out of the city, too.

ROOMS: From ¥15,000 (£79). onetokyo.com

Best for amenities

££ HOTEL NEW OTANI TOKYO

More urban resort than hotel, this vast property — once a filming location for the James Bond film *You Only Live Twice* — occupies a verdant location between multiple parks in the central Chiyoda ward.

The hotel is fringed by 10 acres of 400-year-old Japanese gardens and, unusually for Tokyo, also has an al fresco swimming pool. The 1,474 rooms are spread across three wings, and there are more than three-dozen dining options, plus a lounge with free nibbles and drinks for Executive House Zen guests.

ROOMS: From ¥10,000 (£50). www.hotelnewotani.com

Best for bookworms

££ SHIBA PARK HOTEL

The printed page takes centre stage from the moment you walk in to this hotel, which houses a collection of around 1,500 books. As well as a double-height atrium lined with wooden shelves of books, there's also a fireside library lounge and book corners on every floor, each themed around different aspects of Japanese culture. The rooms are comfy, contemporary retreats in which to curl up in with a good read — and the views of Tokyo Tower, lit up like a beacon at night, aren't half bad either.

ROOMS: From ¥10,000 (£50). shibaparkhotel.com

Best for families

££ KEIO PLAZA HOTEL TOKYO

With reasonable prices, a prime location near Shinjuku station and views out to Mount Fuji on a clear day, this option ticks a lot of boxes. Rooms are a bit bland (unless you plump for a suite with tatami mats and *shoji* screen doors), but for families, the spacious four-bed options more than make up for the uninspiring decor. On-site experiences such as tea ceremonies make getting a culture fix easy if you're wrangling kids. The seventh-floor outdoor pool, 11 restaurants and laundromat also help.

ROOMS: From ¥12,000 (£60). keioplaza.com



From top: Tokyo Station Hotel;
sharing dishes at the food hall in
Tokyu Kabukicho Tower, which
also houses Hotel Groove Shinjuku,
A Parkroyal Hotel

Best for nightlife-lovers

££ HOTEL GROOVE SHINJUKU, A PARKROYAL HOTEL

For years, Shinjuku's red-light district Kabukicho was rather sordid, the kind of place you'd head to for late-night karaoke and beers but not for a respectable hotel. All that's changed with this recent opening, which reflects the fun of the city's party heart but also has style and class. Set across floors 18 to 38 in the new Tokyu Kabukicho Tower, the rooms have floor-to-ceiling windows looking out over the neon bustle below, as well as electric-hued carpets and the occasional pop art wall mural. On the building's lower floors, a retro-styled arcade, cinema, live music space and food hall with regional dishes keep the entertainment flowing around the clock.

ROOMS: From ¥31,000 (£163). [hotelgroove.jp](https://www.hotelgroove.jp)

Best for European-style elegance

£££ TOKYO STATION HOTEL

Opened in 1915, and set within the original 20th-century Tokyo Station, this grand hotel could have been lifted from London or Paris. Red bricks and soaring domes characterise the exterior; chandeliers, marble and button-back headboards are part of the old-world European opulence inside. Take tea in the high-ceilinged lobby lounge, ringing with live piano music and the clink of fine silverware, and end the day at the venerable Bar Oak, which serves up an array of Japanese whiskies in moody, wood-lined environs. If you're planning to adventure beyond the capital, the location is unbeatable. Tokyo Station is the main Shinkansen (bullet train) terminal, serving popular destinations such as Kyoto and Osaka, and you can go from bed to boarding in mere minutes.

ROOMS: From ¥135,332 (£711).

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Mexico



THE MOST-VISITED COUNTRY IN LATIN AMERICA, THIS SPIRITED NATION CAPTIVATES TRAVELLERS WITH ITS CARIBBEAN BEACHES AND DISTINCTIVE LOCAL CUISINE. BUT THERE'S MUCH TO EXPERIENCE BEYOND THEM, FROM THE NORTHERN DESERTS OF BAJA CALIFORNIA TO THE MURAL-FILLED STREETS OF MEXICO CITY AND THE STEAMY SOUTHERN JUNGLES OF THE YUCATÁN, AND ITS INDIGENOUS CULTURE AND REMNANTS OF MAYAN AND AZTEC CIVILISATIONS ARE MORE EASILY ACCESSIBLE THAN EVER

WORDS: JESSICA VINCENT

HIKING

Land of the Maya

Inland from Yucatán's white beaches, the long-distance Camino del Mayab hiking trail is set to revive ailing Maya communities with jungle treks weaving past overgrown haciendas and secret cenotes

It's an indescribable feeling, plunging into cool, clear water after walking for hours through the Yucatán jungle. I'm surrounded by the tall overhanging cliff walls of a cenote — a type of freshwater sinkhole believed by the ancient Maya to be portals to the underworld, and often used as sacrificial sites. The water is a mix of emerald green and turquoise, with large lily pads floating on the surface and thick alamo tree roots plunging to its depths from the cliffs like giant eels.

It's day one of my five-day hike along Mexico's Camino del Mayab — a long-distance hiking and biking trail opened in late 2020 — and the 32°C heat and 80% humidity is getting to me. But with 11 miles to walk before sunset, there's only so much time for pool dips. Following a dirt path flanked by thick jungle, we reach San Antonio Tzacalá, a small Maya village built around the crumbling red walls of a 19th-century hacienda. Abandoned in the mid-1900s, the Spanish estate has been lost to nature: entire alamo trees rise from the roof like squatting giants, while creeping vines pierce through thick cement as if it were honeycomb.

"Yucatán is the land of cenotes and haciendas," says Cristian Sulub, a fresh-faced 22-year-old wearing rimless, rectangular glasses and a straw hat. Cristian, who is of Maya descent, is San Antonio Tzacalá's youngest-ever mayor and a keen historian. When he heard we were walking through his town, he came to greet us. "Cenotes represent our ancient past; haciendas our colonial history."

The hacienda in San Antonio Tzacalá is one of hundreds in Yucatán, built during the 19th century when the *henequen* trade took off. *Henequen*, also known as *sisal*, is a type of fibrous agave native to the Yucatán Peninsula,

years to make ropes, baskets and fishing lines. But in the mid-19th century, the Spanish began exporting Yucatán's 'green gold' to the US and Europe. Forcing the Indigenous population to work the fields for little or no pay, European plantation owners grew extremely wealthy, building railroads, factories and more than 300 haciendas across Yucatán.

Three years in the making, the Camino del Mayab is a 68-mile trail created to help reverse centuries of colonial exploitation in Yucatán — 'Mayab' is what the ancient Maya called Yucatán before the Spanish changed its name in the 16th century. After the Mexican Revolution of the 1910s and the Great Depression of the 1930s, Yucatán's *henequen* industry began to decline, with most haciendas closing by the 1950s. Inequality and prejudice towards the Maya, however, continued. Today, higher education, jobs and access to medical care are limited outside of Mérida and Cancún, forcing many Maya people to abandon their villages and way of life.

"The Maya village is under threat," says our guide Uri Huesca, as we make our way out of the crumbling hacienda. Uri is the co-founder of EcoGuerreros Yucatán, the environmental organisation that founded and now manages the Camino del Mayab. "We want to empower Maya communities to make a living without leaving their homelands, while also sharing their history and culture with the world."

The Camino del Mayab follows old *henequen* transportation routes through 14 Maya communities, from the former plantation village of Dzoyaxché to the ancient Maya city of Mayapan. The trail was developed in partnership with Maya communities, and 80% of its profits remain in Maya villages

Right: Ik-Kil cenote near Chichén Itzá on the Yucatán Peninsula
Previous pages from left: Tlacolula market in the town of Tlacolula de Matamoros, Oaxaca; the sun rising across the desert in Baja California

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FIVE OF THE BEST MAYA RUINS

CHICHÉN ITZÁ

Named one of the new Seven Wonders of the World in 2007, Chichén Itzá in Yucatán is Mexico’s most famous ruin. Despite the crowds, few are disappointed with El Castillo — a 78ft pyramid — or the city’s *tlachtli*, the largest Maya ball court in the Americas. chichenitza.com

TULUM

Occupied until the 16th century, Tulum was one of the last cities inhabited by the Maya and the only one built by the coast. The pyramids here aren’t as large as at other Maya ruins, but the setting, on 40ft cliffs above the Caribbean Sea south of Cancun, makes up for it. tulumruins.net

PALENQUE

Deep in the jungles of northeastern Chiapas state, this late classic Maya city is known for its detailed hieroglyphic inscriptions and sculpted reliefs. inah.gob.mx

CALAKMUL

In the Calakmul Biosphere Reserve near the border with Guatemala, Calakmul is one of Mexico’s wildest Maya ruins. The site is particularly beautiful at sunrise, when the jungle comes alive with the sounds of birds and howler monkeys.

UXMAL

A one-hour drive from Mérida is this seventh-century Maya city, which was once home to as many as 25,000 inhabitants. The ruins are part of the Puuc Route, a 25-mile road network that connects Uxmal with several other archaeological sites. yucatan.travel

Clockwise from top left: The Temple of Kukulcan, also known as El Castillo, at Chichén Itzá on the Yucatán Peninsula; brightly coloured arches line the courtyard at Hacienda Yaxcopoil; hiking the Camino del Mayab trail; a Maya priest gives a traditional blessing on the trail

community-owned lands and eating home-cooked meals prepared by village cooks.

Continuing to Pebá, a two-hour walk from San Antonio Tzacalá, we spot a flash of electric blue and pale orange among a sea of endless green. It’s a Yucatán jay, a bird endemic to the peninsula. Further on, perching on the branches of an 80-year-old ceiba tree, is a turquoise-browed motmot, a cenote-dwelling bird the ancient Maya used to find fresh water.

“Yucatán is one of Mexico’s most biodiverse states,” says Uri, as we pass a Middle American indigo snake coiled under a bush of purple pea flowers. “But it’s at risk of being destroyed.”

There are almost 400 bird species in Yucatán and over 100 mammals, many of which are endangered. Jaguars, tapirs and ocelots, Uri explains, would have once been abundant here, but due to habitat loss — some 50,000 acres of jungle are lost annually in Yucatán to farmland and illegal logging — they’ve become increasingly rare. Environmental activists have also blamed the new Tren Maya — a controversial 966-mile train line launched in December 2023 that crosses the Yucatán jungle — for endangering the peninsula’s biodiversity.

“The Camino del Mayab isn’t just about saving Maya culture, it’s about protecting nature, too,” says Uri. EcoGuerreros has helped to establish hundreds of acres of ecological reserves in Yucatán through a network of protected *ejidos*, communal land managed by Indigenous communities.

The next day, a Pebá local known as Don Octavio — a slight, elderly man with deep lines across his forehead and dirt beneath his nails — guides us through the jungle to the Maya village of Yaxcopoil, home to one of Yucatán’s best-preserved haciendas. Wearing smart suit trousers and leather sandals, Don Octavio hacks a path through the thick overgrowth with his machete, pointing out medicinal herbs and wildflowers and

by *meliponas*, stingless bees whose honey has been cultivated by the Maya for 3,000 years.

Among the vegetation are a few surviving *henequen* from an abandoned plantation Don Octavio used to work on. Unlike most plantations in Yucatán, which closed in the 1950s, this one continued to operate for a few decades longer. Don Octavio says the plantation owners treated him well, and the work allowed him to stay in his village. “Now look at it,” he says, pointing to a pile of rubble that would have once housed a Maya family. “Everyone’s leaving to work in Mérida. Soon, there will be no one left.”

Over the next few days, as we walk 40 miles from Yaxcopoil towards Mayapan, I watch pink fog lift from the jungle canopy at sunrise, eat pulled pork slow-cooked underground and fire-toasted tortillas in the homes of Maya families, and camp beneath a sky full of stars. But swimming in the region’s cavernous cenotes is what I look forward to most.

I imagined the end of my journey on the Camino del Mayab stood atop Mayapan’s Temple of Kukulcan, seeing the trail I’d just walked sprawled across the jungle beneath me. But protests over entrance fees have closed the trail’s finishing point. Instead, I’m on the shores of a cenote near X-Kanchakán, where a white-robed shaman is summoning the Maya gods under the thundering rain. His chanting — spoken in Yucatec Maya — reverberates across the water with a deafening clap of thunder. When he finishes, the rain clears and the sky lights up in a strange silver-purple hue. “A good omen,” says the shaman in Spanish. “You’re welcome here, traveller.”

Camino del Mayab’s five-day guided hiking trip starts at 12,900 MXN (£605) per person, which includes trail accommodation, meals, camping gear, transfers and entrance fees to cenotes and haciendas. Cycling tours are also available.

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FOOD & DRINK

Fire in the belly

In the villages of the Oaxaca Valley, pre-Hispanic cooking is having a renaissance — spearheaded by female chefs who are helping to keep Mexico's ancestral recipes alive

The town's central market is in full swing when we reach Tlacolula de Matamoros, around 18 miles east of Oaxaca City. Through a fog of sun-lit smoke, I see women — their black, plaited hair threaded with green and gold ribbon to their waist — throwing slabs of meat onto fire-licked griddles. Tripe, tongue and strings of chorizo hang beneath white strip lights, while families dip *pan de yema* — a Oaxacan sweet bread similar to brioche — into bowls of frothy hot chocolate.

Since the time of the ancient Zapotecs in 500 BCE, my guide Maria Itaka explains, millions of Oaxacans have made the weekly journey to Tlacolula to buy and sell their goods, facilitating more than 2,000 years of Indigenous trade. "The Spanish created Oaxaca City because they couldn't conquer Tlacolula," says Maria, a Oaxacan food journalist and trip designer for Culinary Backstreets. "There was too much resistance from the Indigenous people here. Food was — and still is — a big part of that resistance."

The southern state of Oaxaca — a land of white sand beaches, forested mountains and fertile valleys — has one of Mexico's highest Indigenous populations, with over 50% belonging to one of the state's 16 official Indigenous groups. Despite centuries of colonisation, Oaxacan food — a cuisine rooted in native Mexican ingredients like corn and chilli, and the custom of cooking over fire and smoke — has maintained a strong Indigenous identity. Recipes go back generations — a feat that, for many in Oaxaca, symbolises a triumph over colonialism.

A short taxi ride north of central Tlacolula, Maria takes me for lunch at Mo-Kalli — a small, exposed-brick restaurant run by Catalina Lukas, one of Oaxaca's most celebrated *cocineras tradicionales* (traditional female cooks). Mexico's community female cooks are considered the torchbearers of the country's ancestral UNESCO-listed cuisine — and those hailing from Oaxaca and Michoacán are particularly famous.

When we meet Catalina, she's wearing a red *huipil* (woven tunic) and a silver spoon necklace. She ushers me inside her restaurant, where Oaxaca's seven famous *mole*s — thick, stew-like sauces made with dried chillies, spices and nuts — are simmering in clay pots over red-hot embers. Each one, she explains, plays an important role in major life events: the rich, chocolatey *mole negro* for baptisms and weddings, the bitter *mole chichilo* for funerals.

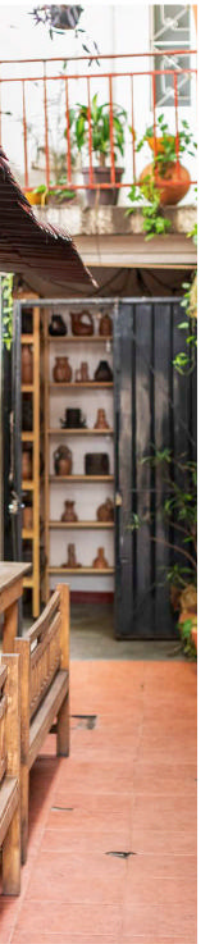
I try every *mole*, and the highlight is Lukas' *mole coloradito*: it's sweet and fragrant with a subtle hint of spice. *Coloradito* is traditionally prepared for the parents of a woman who's had relations with a man before marriage, its delicious sweetness capable of soothing even the most delicate of family feuds. Catalina's version is based on her mother's recipe, but with the rare *chilhuacle rojo*, a chilli native to Oaxaca that's in danger of disappearing. "That's exactly why I use it," says Catalina,

The next day, I travel 35 miles east of Oaxaca to the small town of San Antonio Cuajimuloyas to have lunch at Doña Angelica's, a one-table restaurant overlooking the pine-covered mountains of Oaxaca's Sierra Norte. Like Catalina, Doña Angelica started cooking for funerals and festivals from a young age. Today, her restaurant serves ingredients from her *milpa* — an ancient Mesoamerican farming system. I try a *taco de cabeza* — slow-cooked beef-head stuffed into a tortilla. It's deliciously tender and very rich. I ask Angelica what it means to be recognised as a *cocinera tradicional* by her community. "I'm just a *cocinera*," she says, shrugging. "I cook what I grow, and I grow what I know. That's all."

Journey Latin America's 13-day Discover Mexico: Oaxaca's Culture and Coastline tour starts from £3,840 per person, excluding flights. Culinary Backstreets offers market visits in Oaxaca from £91 per person and multi-day food tours from £2,188 per person, excluding flights. [journeylatinamerica.com](https://www.journeylatinamerica.com)

and [culinarybackstreets.com](https://www.culinarybackstreets.com) join Search <https://t.me/sharewithpride> (sharewithpride)





IMAGES: ANDREW REINER



A woman making tejate, a traditional cacao and corn drink, at the market in Tlaxolula
Left from top: La Cocina de Humo is a restaurant in Oaxaca City serving refined versions of village recipes; corn is a native Mexican ingredient and one of the cornerstones of traditional cuisine in Oaxaca





A cargo truck in Oaxaca transporting agave hearts
 Clockwise from left: Bottles of mezcal at the artisanal Real Minero distillery in Santa Catarina Minas; agave is cut and shaved down to prepare for cooking and distillation; caring for agave plants at Real Minero distillery

FOOD & DRINK

An intro to mezcal

Tequila’s cousin has been made in Mexico for centuries – and, in its Oaxacan heartland, you can see it made the traditional way

Agave, or *maguey* in the ancient Nahuatl language of the Aztecs, has been part of Mesoamerican culture for thousands of years. This rosette plant with spiny, blue-green leaves can grow up to 10 feet high and is one of Mexico’s most revered plants. Throughout the country’s history, it’s been used as a source of food, clothing, medicine and, since the Spanish conquest in the early 16th century, to make spirits like tequila and mezcal.

The ancestor of tequila, mezcal — derived from the word *mexicali*, meaning ‘cooked agave’ in Nahuatl — was born after the Spanish introduced distillation to Mexico.

Today, most producers continue making mezcal using 16th-century methods: the heart of the plant is smoked underground for several days before being crushed by a millstone known as a *tahona*, usually drawn by horses or oxen. The pulp is then added to wooden vats for fermentation, followed by at least two distillations. The result is a smooth, smoky and seriously punchy spirit, with an ABV of 38% to 55%, depending on the brand.

Increasingly popular in bars from New York to London, mezcal is traditionally drunk neat from *copitas* (small cups), and often served with

a slice of orange and *sal de gusano*, a mix of salt, chilli and toasted and ground agave worms.

Mezcal can only be made from agave plants native to Mexico. Nine states can legally produce the spirit, but the largest producer in the country is Oaxaca. This southern Mexican state is home to hundreds of family-owned, artisanal distilleries and considered the heartland of mezcal. Here, mezcal-making traditions are deeply entwined with the lives of rural Oaxaqueños, and fiercely protected.

You can try the drink in almost every bar in Oaxaca City, the state capital, but the best way to understand this storied tippie is by visiting one of its *palenques*: rustic distilleries among fields of corn and neatly planted rows of agave. In this part of rural Oaxaca, where smoke rises constantly from bubbling clay and copper distillation pots, fourth- and fifth-generation *mezcaleros* and *mezcaleras* still produce the spirit as their ancestors did 500 years ago.

Most palenque visits require an organised tour or private guide. Oaxaking, Tlayudona and Culinary Backstreets can all arrange trips from Oaxaca City. oaxacking.com, tlayudona.com.mx, culinarybackstreets.com

MEET THE MAKER



Graciela Ángeles Carreño
A fourth-generation producer of artisanal mezcal brand Real Minero

WHAT DOES MEZCAL MEAN TO YOU?

Mezcal isn’t just a trend or something to be sold — it’s part of who we are. The agave plant has been part of my family history since the 18th century. We make mezcal in clay pots and bury it underground, not because it makes us more money (it doesn’t) or because it’s easy (it’s not), but because it’s how our fathers and grandfathers made it, and how we want our children to make it.

WHAT CHALLENGES ARE YOU FACING?

Mezcal became famous almost overnight, so producers didn’t have time to prepare for the growing demand. Now, without proper regulation, the land is being overexploited and some agave varieties are in danger of becoming extinct. We founded an agave seed bank and nursery to collect, document and propagate as many disappearing species as we can.

WHAT MAKES GOOD MEZCAL AND HOW SHOULD WE DRINK IT?

Good mezcal, just like any good cheese or wine, should taste of where it comes from. Always drink it neat, and in good company.
realminero.com.mx

THREE OAXACA DISTILLERIES TO VISIT

Mezcal FaneKantsini

FaneKantsini is part of a mezcal cooperative called Tres Colibri, which is headed by master *mezcalera* Sosima Olivera Aguilar — part of a growing community of female mezcal producers fighting for gender equality in Oaxaca’s male-dominated mezcal industry.
faneKantsini.com

La Candelaria

Located in Santa Catarina Minas, this is where Eduardo ‘Lalo’ Angeles produces his Mezcal Lalocura, which is distilled exclusively in clay pots. Espadin, tepeztate and pechuga, the latter a mezcal that’s distilled with a raw chicken breast inside it, are usually available for

Gracias a Dios

Santiago Matatlán, dubbed the world capital of mezcal, is where you’ll find Gracias a Dios, a sustainability-focused *palenque* that uses recycled bottles and corks, irrigates 60% of its fields using rainwater, and plants around 5,000 trees per year.

IMAGES: ANDREW REINER; ALAMY



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CITY LIFE

Culture capital

Amid art deco architecture and Frida Kahlo art, find remnants of pre-Hispanic traditions and an Indigenous crafts scene in Mexico City

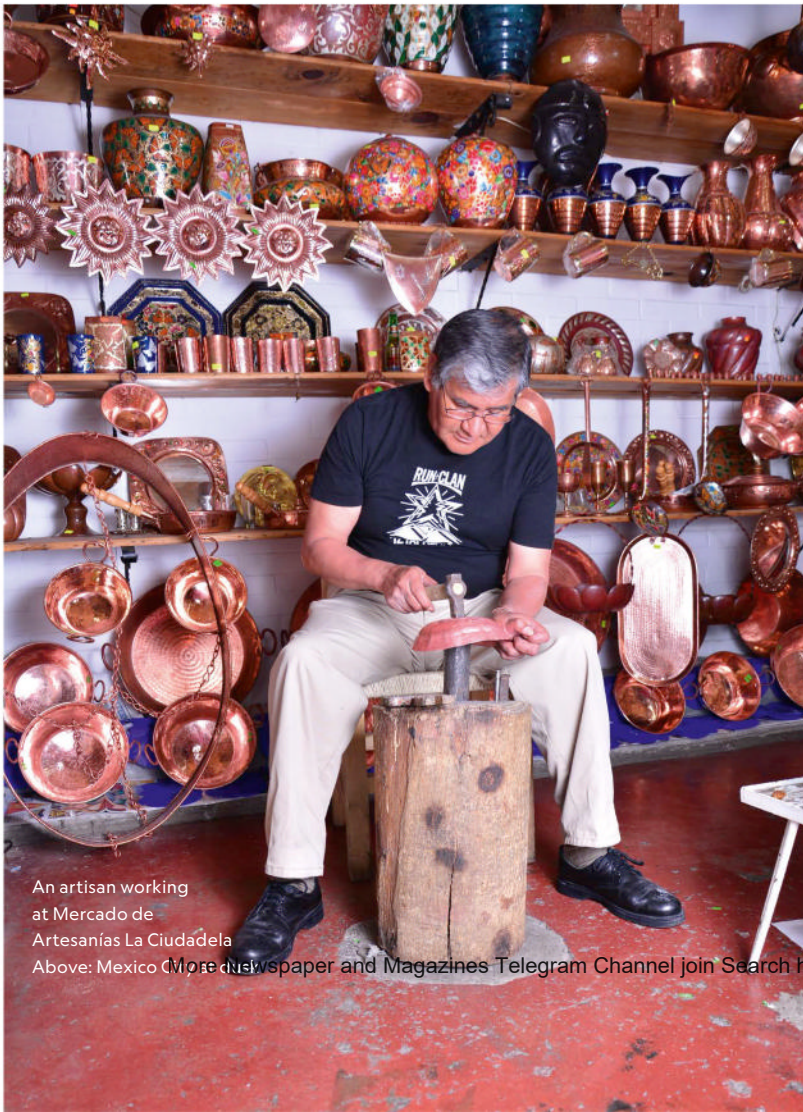
Kayak the ancient canals of Xochimilco

Before the Spanish conquest in 1521, Mexico City, then called Tenochtitlán, was built on two small islands inside Lake Texcoco. Surrounded by water, the Aztecs built canals and floating farms called *chinampas* to feed and house its growing population. Today, all that remains of these ancient waterways are in Tláhuac and Xochimilco, a neighbourhood 15 miles south of Mexico City's Centro Historico. Flat-bottomed party boats called *trajineras* cruise Xochimilco's canals daily, but a guided kayaking trip offers a more tranquil — and environmentally friendly — visit. Tours offer the chance to spot Xochimilco's wildlife, including the critically endangered axolotl salamander and more than 200 bird species, while learning about the history and science behind *chinampas*, which still provide food for Mexico City residents today. abnb.me/tD5Q0J9WmHb

Sip on pulque, the drink of the Aztec gods

At least 2,000 years old, *pulque* — a drink made from the fermented sap of agave, the same plant that's used to make tequila and mezcal — is Mexico's oldest alcoholic beverage. During the Aztec empire, *pulque* was considered a sacred drink, reserved for gods, emperors and ceremonial events. The introduction of beer and distilled spirits by the Spanish in the 16th century marked the beginning of the end for *pulque*, with many of Mexico City's *pulquerias* — taverns specialising in the drink — eventually closing between the early 20th and 21st centuries. But a recent resurgence has seen several reopen across the city, making it one of the best places in Mexico to try the tipple. La Canica — a *pulqueria* in the Tabacalera neighbourhood, run by a family that has been in the *pulque* business for five generations — takes a modern approach to the ancient drink, infusing freshly made *pulque* with dozens of seasonal flavours, from guava and mandarin to marzipan and toasted oats.

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An artisan working at Mercado de Artesanías La Ciudadela

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Museo de Arte Popular houses a large collection of handicrafts in Mexico City

Try Mexico City's ancient caviar

Ahuautle — which loosely translates to 'seeds of joy' in the Aztec language of Nahuatl and are also known as water fly eggs — were sacred to the ancient Aztecs. During the rainy season, a type of water fly called *Axayácatl* would lay its eggs in Lake Texcoco, which were harvested for Aztec emperors and used as offerings to the gods. Montezuma, one of the last emperors of the Aztec empire, is said to have eaten them every morning to improve his strength. Hard to get hold of and up to four times more expensive per kilo than beef, the eggs have been dubbed *ahuautle*, the 'caviar' of Mexico, by the capital's chefs. Ayuardo's, in the Iztapalapa neighbourhood, in the east of Mexico City, is one of only a handful of restaurants in the capital that still has *ahuautle* on the menu. It serves the water fly eggs — the taste is intensely fishy, similar to dried shrimp — in pancakes with *tomatillo* (a bright green, acidic fruit native to Mexico) and serrano chilli sauce. [facebook.com/ayuardos](https://www.facebook.com/ayuardos)

Browse the Museo de Arte Popular

In the historic centre of Mexico City is the Museo de Arte Popular, a beautifully designed handicraft museum housed inside a 1920s art deco building. The museum, which once served as Mexico City's fire department headquarters, celebrates traditional Mexican craftsmanship in all its forms, from textiles and pottery to

giant *alebrijes* — mythical creatures made from wood or papier-mâché. High-quality crafts from almost every Mexican state are displayed thematically over several floors, including ceramics from Jalisco, piñatas from Puebla and ceremonial masks from Chiapas. Particularly striking are the *Arbol de la Vida* (Tree of Life) pieces — colourful, intricate clay sculptures depicting the creation of life — and the small but impressive Day of the Dead craft collection. map.cdmx.gob.mx

Support indigenous crafts at Mercado de Artesanías La Ciudadela

Just a few minutes' walk from Museo de Arte Popular is this hub for artisans, Mexico City's largest and best arts and crafts market. It's home to 350 stands selling a huge variety of crafts, or *artesanías* in Spanish, from all over Mexico, including handblown glass from Jalisco, silver jewellery from Guerrero and patterned chaquira beadwork from Jalisco, crafted by the indigenous Huichol people. For beautiful ceremonial Mayan masks made of wood and obsidian, head to stand 104, where you'll often see the craftsman at work. Also seek out the artisans selling *amate* paper art — colourful works painted onto paper made from the pulp of fig and mulberry trees; the same type of paper was once used by the ancient Aztecs and Mayas to produce manuscripts. [facebook.com/TeotihuacanandTlacotaline](https://www.facebook.com/TeotihuacanandTlacotaline) <https://t.me/sharewithpride>

Experience Mexican folk dance at El Ballet Folklórico de México

Founded in 1952 by choreographer and dancer Amalia Hernández, Ballet Folklórico celebrates Mexico's diverse folkloric traditions through dance, music and traditional dress. The performance takes the audience from Mexico's ancient past up to the Mexican Revolution in 1910, travelling through the states of Oaxaca, Jalisco, Sonora, Zacatecas, Guerrero and more. Many of the dances take inspiration from Mexico's Indigenous cultures, such as the Deer Dance — a contemporary piece that depicts a pre-hunting ritual practised by the Indigenous people of Sonora and Sinaloa — and the Guelaguetza, a folkloric ballet inspired by the ceremonial dances of the Mixtec and Zapotec people of Oaxaca. Performances are held at the Palacio de Bellas Artes — a white-marbled, art nouveau palace commissioned by president Porfirio Díaz in 1905 — on Wednesdays at 8.30pm and Sundays at 9.30am and 8.30pm. balletfolkloricodemexico-com-mx

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WILDLIFE

Taking flight

In the highland forests of Michoacán, millions of monarch butterflies arrive without fail every winter — and nature tours are helping local communities safeguard their future

'I gazed in amazement at the sight' reads a photocopy of a 1976 *National Geographic* article on my lap. The words are bouncing on the page as the truck flies over steep mountain roads, but I can't stop reading. 'Butterflies — millions upon millions of monarch butterflies!'

The monarch's wintering home — a mystery to scientists until the 1970s — was confirmed when Canadian zoologist Fred Urquhart and American entomologist Lincoln Brower were called to the northern Michoacán mountains in early 1976. Urquhart had spent 30 years studying their winter migration and the discovery made the cover of *National Geographic* a few months later, with a feature written by him.

Almost 50 years on, I'm making the same journey to Mexico's Central Highlands, hoping to see the world's greatest insect migration for myself. These days it's possible to take a tour. I've joined a five-day trip to El Rosario and Sierra Chincua, two UNESCO-protected sanctuaries in the Highlands. Between November and March, they become the wintering grounds for millions of monarch butterflies seeking refuge from the freezing temperatures in North America.

Our open-air truck rattles on a cobbled road as we climb to 9,850 feet above sea level. Now and again I get a glimpse of the mighty Sierra Madre: a chain of densely forested mountains cloaked in wisps of pearl-coloured fog, or perhaps smoke from a village cooking fire. Cowboys ride the cobbled streets on horseback,

At El Rosario, we mount horses to help us reach the monarch colony. When the steep, muddy trail opens into a clearing, we dismount and continue on foot. Raindrops hang from pine needles like icicles and I see a flash of green and red as a white-eared hummingbird sips on nectar.

With every step, the number of dead or drowsy butterflies resting on the forest floor multiplies. Their wings, thin as parchment paper, are a deep orange with black veins and white spots along the edges. "We're getting close," whispers one of our guides, Eric Ramirez.

Up ahead, I spot enormous native oyamel fir trees covered in a strange textured shadow that runs along the trees' midribs, like an embroidered dress woven in grey and pale orange threads; their branches droop and sway with great effort in the wind. "We're here," says Eric, excitement ringing in his voice.

It takes me a moment to realise but, just as Urquhart had described, thousands of monarchs are clinging to the trees in thick clumps with wings closed tight, like a beehive protecting its queen. While a single monarch weighs less than a gram, their combined weight is heavy enough to warp the branches of an ancient oyamel tree. Despite never visiting this forest before — it takes at least four or five generations of monarchs to complete the round-trip from North America to central Mexico — the butterflies return to the same group of fir trees every year,

From left: A guide in the Monarch Butterfly Biosphere Reserve; monarch butterflies huddle around a tree in a 'roost' to protect themselves from predators

trailed by dogs that bark and howl. The guide, a local man, joins us on horseback. I see a flash of green and red as a white-eared hummingbird sips on nectar. With every step, the number of dead or drowsy butterflies resting on the forest floor multiplies. Their wings, thin as parchment paper, are a deep orange with black veins and white spots along the edges. "We're getting close," whispers one of our guides, Eric Ramirez. Up ahead, I spot enormous native oyamel fir trees covered in a strange textured shadow that runs along the trees' midribs, like an embroidered dress woven in grey and pale orange threads; their branches droop and sway with great effort in the wind. "We're here," says Eric, excitement ringing in his voice. It takes me a moment to realise but, just as Urquhart had described, thousands of monarchs are clinging to the trees in thick clumps with wings closed tight, like a beehive protecting its queen. While a single monarch weighs less than a gram, their combined weight is heavy enough to warp the branches of an ancient oyamel tree. Despite never visiting this forest before — it takes at least four or five generations of monarchs to complete the round-trip from North America to central Mexico — the butterflies return to the same group of fir trees every year,





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A single monarch weighs less than a gram, but their combined weight is heavy enough to warp the branches of an ancient tree

“It’s a mystery how they know where to go,” Eric tells me as we take a closer look through a telescope. “Brower had a theory that they use magnetite crystals in the earth to navigate, but we don’t know for certain.”

The next morning, 11 miles north in the butterfly sanctuary of Sierra Chincua, the sun pierces through the clouds, warming the monarchs’ wings and sending them fluttering into the air. Their deep orange sets the blue sky ablaze, as if someone has lit a million pieces of paper on fire and dropped them from a plane. Surrounded, I’m sure I can hear their wings beating through the air, like a whisper in my ear.

“If you’re quiet enough, you can hear them talking,” says a man next to me. He’s a mezcal producer from the nearby city of Zitacuaro, visiting with his family. I ask who he means by ‘them’. “Our ancestors,” he responds.

Monarchs often arrive in Mexico around Dia de los Muertos (Day of the Dead; 1-2 November), a time when Mexicans believe the departed can rejoin their families for feasting and celebration. The timing led the Purépecha — an Indigenous group that settled in Michoacán around the 11th century — to believe monarchs were the souls of their ancestors returning to Earth.

“You think this is beautiful,” says Diego Gonzalez, our guide in Sierra Chincua, as the butterflies flutter back to their branches. “I remember when we had 400 trees full of monarchs — you couldn’t see the sky there were so many.”

It’s difficult to believe while I’m surrounded

are at their lowest-ever numbers. According to WWF, their population has declined by 90% in the last two decades due to illegal logging in Mexico, the use of herbicides in the US and Canada, and extreme weather conditions caused by global warming. Conservation organisations such as WWF and the Michoacán Reforestation Fund are working with land owners and governments to reduce deforestation and protect the monarchs’ wintering grounds. Sustainable wildlife tourism — the most obvious alternative to logging — could be part of the solution.

“We know monarch populations can bounce back quickly given the chance,” says Fernando Romo, who’s been guiding monarch tours like this one for Natural Habitat Adventures, WWF’s official tourism partner, in Michoacán, for over 20 years. “I’ve noticed big changes in the town of Angangueo — more children are going to school, houses are in better condition, and there’s very little illegal logging within the sanctuaries now. That’s all down to tourism.”

Whether the only known butterfly migration on Earth will still exist in another 50 years is uncertain. But, for now, Mexico’s conservation efforts and the commitment of local communities gives me some hope for the monarchs’ survival.

Natural Habitat Adventures’ six-day Kingdom of the Monarchs tour runs from November to early March. Prices start from US\$4,995 (£3,920) per person, excluding international flights and visas. Book now at <https://www.nha.com/mexico>

Above: Travellers visit Cosmovitral Botanical Garden in the Indigenous settlement of Toluca as part of the Natural Habitat Adventures’ Kingdom of the Monarchs tour.

IMAGE: COURT WHELAN



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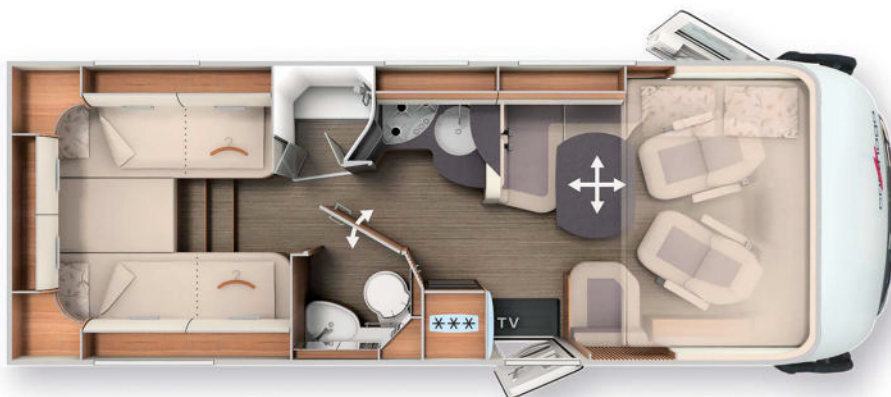
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SLOW TRAVEL

All aboard the Chepe Express

Take an epic rail adventure into the Copper Canyon for river kayaking, zip-lining and opportunities to learn from Indigenous communities



The Chepe Express travels through ravines and alongside rivers

Travelling 220 miles through northwestern Mexico to the coastal city of Los Mochis in Sinaloa to the mountain town of Creel in Chihuahua, the Chepe Express is one of Mexico's few long-distance passenger trains — and an epic one at that. It runs through ravines, deserts, gorges and rivers, via 37 bridges and 86 tunnels, to reach Copper Canyon, a chain of six UNESCO-protected rocky canyons. Combined, they form a gorge that's four times larger than the Grand Canyon in the US.

The journey, which takes nine hours to complete, can be done in a day. However, a hop-on, hop-off ticket allows passengers to explore Copper Canyon's towns and sights at a slower pace, staying in hotels or Airbnbs along the route. Highlights include visiting vineyards and waterfalls around the 17th-century Jesuit town of Guisasa, and the

world's second-longest zip-line at Copper Canyon Adventure Park; and kayaking along the forest-flanked El Fuerte river.

But perhaps the most unique experience in Copper Canyon is spending time with the Rarámuri, an Indigenous group who have lived in the state of Chihuahua for nearly 2,000 years. The arrival of the Spanish in the 16th century pushed them into the most remote parts of Copper Canyon. Today, the Rarámuri, which loosely translates to 'runners on foot' in the Rarámuri language, are best known for their long-distance running abilities, local recipes and basket-weaving skills.

A one-way trip from Los Mochis to Creel starts from 2,887 MXN (£134), or 4,301 MXN (£200) for a round-trip. Tickets can be booked via the

THREE RARÁMURI EXPERIENCES

HUETOSACHI COOKING & WEAVING CLASS

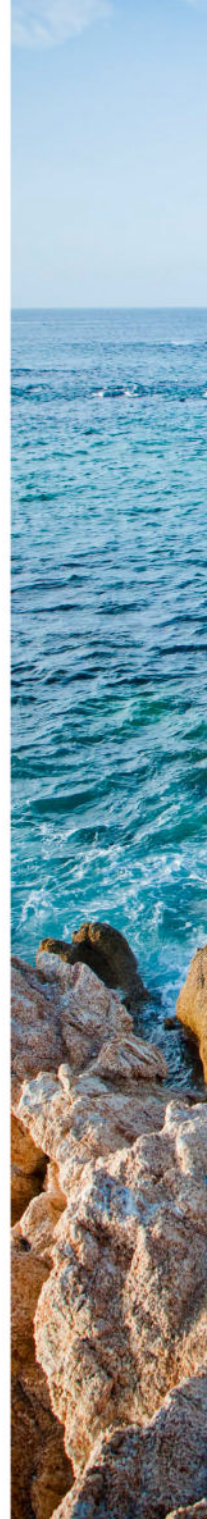
Seek out the local women offering traditional cooking and weaving classes in their homes in the small Rarámuri village of Huetosachi, located 59 miles north of Divisadero station (the penultimate stop on the Chepe Express). You might also learn how to make *pinole* — an ancient drink made with ground corn that Rarámuri runners use to fuel their ultra-marathons — as well as tortillas made with nutritional blue corn. Then comes the art of basket-weaving using the leaves from local yucca and sotol plants. experienciasraramuri.com/huetosachi-experience

THE GIANTS TRAIL

Copper Canyon's rocky cliffs and deep ravines mean that many parts of it can only be accessed on foot. Generations of Rarámuri runners have carved hundreds of trails into the canyon, many of which carry their own legends. Take a guided hike of the three-hour Giants Trail, led by runners from the Bacajipare community, to learn about Los Ganocos — mischievous giants that are said to roam the canyon near the Urique River. experienciasraramuri.com

MUSEO TARAHUMARA DE ARTE POPULAR

Located in Creel's old train station, this museum traces the history of the Rarámuri people, from life in Chihuahua 2,000 years ago to the present day. The collection includes displays of art, textiles and other cultural artefacts, as well as photographs by French photographer Gerard Tournebize, who lived with and documented the lives of Rarámuri people in Copper Canyon from 1989 to 1991. instagram.com/museo.tarahumara



OVERLANDING

A wild ride

Unfurling for more than 750 miles down a stick-thin peninsula, Baja California has long been known for water adventures – but new off-roading tours help travellers see it from a different perspective

Gripping the roof handle and staring silently over the dashboard, I avert my gaze from the 160ft drop to my left. There's just six inches of dirt road standing between us and the cliff edge: one wrong move from our driver, and the pickup truck we're in is going straight into the Sea of Cortez.

The first time I visited Mexico's Baja California, the world's second-longest peninsula, it was on a backpacking trip through Central America. I hitchhiked and bussed over 650 miles from Tijuana, on the border with the US, to Todos Santos, just short of Baja's most southerly point, Cabo San Lucas. Travelling along the Carretera Transpeninsular, I stopped at every major town along Baja's main highway, wine-tasting in Ensenada, and

watching in Guerrero Negro and swimming with sea lions on Espiritu Santo Island.

During those long drives, I'd stare out at the stark desert landscape for hours: salt-encrusted greasewood shrubs and giant cardón cacti sprouted from swathes of sand and clay-red mountains, which often turned candyfloss pink at sunset. But what caught my eye were the narrow dirt tracks, hundreds of them crisscrossing the desert like a map drawn in the sand, veering off the highway towards sun-baked sierras and hidden turquoise coves. One day, I thought to myself, I'd return to Baja California to see where those roads led.

Five years on, I've come to La Paz, in the south of the Baja California peninsula, to

trip. The company has specialised in whale-watching, kayaking and wild camping in the state since the 1970s, but has recently branched out with off-roading tours to encourage visitors to explore the peninsula's less-visited interior.

"People think Baja is just beaches and whales," says our driver Mike Thorneycroft, a Canadian who moved to Baja California in 2020. "But it's more than that. These trips are about getting people out of the resorts and into Baja's least-visited communities, and learning some of their history and culture."

Mike gets us past the cliff edge safely, manoeuvring around asteroid-sized potholes and boulders with ease as we climb up and over Sierra de la Laguna, part of a mountain range that divides the state. With 100



Clockwise from left:
Cacti punctuate
the desert outside
La Ventana in Baja
California Sur; chocolate
clams are native to the
region of Baja California;
Chileno Bay Beach and
rock formations near
Cabo San Lucas; a
mobula ray, also called
manta cubana, flying
over the Sea of Cortez

the southern state of Baja California, with southern California in the US. On slightly wider roads, I start to relax and take in the views: unlike the parched desert I'd seen from the highway years ago, these mountains are lush from recent hurricane rains, flourishing with lime-green mesquite trees and pink and yellow wildflowers. We cross *arroyos* — dry riverbeds that fill up after heavy rainfall — flowing with crystalline water, where orange butterflies and free-roaming piglets from a nearby ranch are taking a drink. A vulture and a flaming red cardinal bird join soon after.

"Baja California is perfect for off-roading," says Mike, who organises and competes in long-distance off-road rallies across the state. "The roads are rocky, uneven and muddy,

changing quickly in the rainy season. But that's what makes it exciting."

Near the former silver-mining town of El Triunfo, we stop at the Santuario de los Cactus, a community-run garden with some of the oldest and rarest cacti on earth, including the cardón, the world's largest cactus. The garden's grey-moustached volunteer caretaker, Guadalupe 'Lupe' Gonzalez, shows us around, pointing out which cacti fruits are edible and how to extract water from their flesh. He also shows us cacti species used to treat kidney stones, stomach aches and open wounds.

"I learnt about the medicinal properties of cacti from the *rancheros* (ranchers)," says Lupe. "The grasshopper spinners are the most

cactus as if they were whiskers. He's been caring for the plants here for more than 30 years and offers guided tours of the garden for a small donation. "But this knowledge comes from the Indians. There are none left here now, but we know how to survive in the desert because of them."

Before the Spanish arrived, Baja California was inhabited by three major Indigenous groups: the Cochimi, the Guaycura and the Pericú. Ancient rock paintings in Sierra de San Francisco, around 465 miles north of where I am and described by UNESCO as some of the most impressive collections of rock paintings in the world, suggest that these tribes had lived on the peninsula for at least 10,000 years.



Sunset in Cabo San Lucas
on the southern tip of the
Baja California peninsula

Although the Spanish colonised Baja California much later than Mexico's mainland, around the late 17th century, the culture and history of these local Indigenous groups was erased more quickly than in the rest of Mexico. Some experts believe this is because the region's Indigenous groups were nomadic hunter-gatherers, who lacked the big cities and societal structures that helped preserve the legacies of the Mayans and Aztecs in other Mexican states. Today, very few Indigenous groups remain, with most living in the north of Baja California.

After a few hours of driving along the spectacular Barriles Santa Teresa coastal road, we make the steep descent to Palo Blanco beach, where we'll be spending the night. It's a wild strip of sand, where milky-red cliffs crumble into a dazzling turquoise sea studded with volcanic rock. Come sunset, it's just our truck on the beach and a flock of pelicans floating on the dead-still water, like rubber ducks in a jade-coloured bath. We eat refried beans and chicken burritos under the stars, watching a brilliant-white crescent moon rise over the water. That night, I sleep to the sound of the waves lapping gently at the shoreline.

The next morning, I watch the beach come to life from my tent. As the sun rises above the horizon, the sea turns from liquid silver to light pink, illuminating the sand and rocks

with a warm glow. A family of pelicans — each one resembling a light aircraft — skim across the water with mouths agape, hoping to catch one of the flying fish backflipping through the air. Eager to join the action, I roll out of the tent and into the sea, plunging head first into the crystal-clear water with my mask and snorkel. Below the surface is an underwater city made of coral and volcanic rock, and colourful fish: I see a long, translucent cornetfish; a tiny cortez rainbow wrasse; and an enormous shoal of California yellowtail, the soft morning light bouncing off their tinfoil-like skin.

It's tempting to stay longer on this wild, empty beach, lounging on the rocks and floating in the warm turquoise waters as the resident pelicans do. But Mike has packed up camp and started the engine — it's time to continue our journey through the desert roads of Baja California. "That's the thing with overlanding," says Mike, opening the passenger door for me to get in. "There's always one more road to explore."

Cazenove + Loyd runs tailor-made, luxury holidays across Mexico and Baja California, which can combine multi-day overlanding trips with whale-watching tours, kayaking, scuba diving and more. A 10-day example itinerary to Mexico starts from £5,200 per person, including flights, accommodation, transport, meals, drinks, and more. Book now at [cazenove.com](https://www.cazenove.com).

GETTING THERE & AROUND

There are direct flights from the UK to both Cancun and Mexico City. TUI flies to Cancun from Gatwick, Manchester, Birmingham, Bristol, Newcastle, Doncaster Sheffield, Edinburgh and Glasgow, while British Airways and AeroMexico fly to Mexico City from Heathrow. tui.co.uk ba.com aeromexico.com

Average flight time: 10-12h.

Mexico is a huge country and there's no national rail network, so getting between states requires either long-distance bus journeys or flying. Private bus companies such as ADO and ETN offer comfortable overland transport to many states across Mexico, including Oaxaca, Yucatán, Mexico City and Michoacán. Mexico City Airport is the country's main air transport hub, with multiple daily national flights to most states operated by AeroMexico, Viva Aerobus and Volaris. ado.com.mx etn.com.mx aeromexico.com vivaerobus.com volaris.com

WHEN TO GO

Mexico's weather can vary depending on the region, but generally the dry season runs from December to April, with the coolest months between December and February. In Mexico's southern states, such as Yucatán, the climate is humid, whereas the far north can be much drier. On the Caribbean coast, temperatures will rarely drop below 28C in the winter, but in places with higher elevation, such as Mexico City and Michoacán, temperatures can drop to as low as 5C during the night.

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WHERE WATERS



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In the southern reaches of Vietnam, life has revolved around the water for hundreds of years. Here, in the Mekong Delta and on the Con Dao islands of the South China Sea, communities continue to embrace old ways while looking to the future in this rapidly developing pocket of Asia



WORDS: LORNA PARKES. PHOTOGRAPHY: ULF SVANE

RUN DEEP

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THE RIVER HAS EYES.

Flashes of blood red and pearly white peer through curtains of coconut palms along the riverbank. Others push through the flotsam and jetsam of the Mekong, breaking up congregations of swollen-stalked water hyacinths and coconut husks borne along by the torpid current. Legend has it that this mighty waterway is ruled by river monsters, but these fiery eyes are painted onto boats — big ones laid low with mountains of coconuts, little ones ferrying fishing traps and fruit farmers cradling jackfruits and durians.

“It’s a tradition of the area to decorate boats like this,” says my guide Jerry Le, baseball cap in hand, his American-inflected drawl lifted onto the breeze that follows in the wake of a large cargo ship passing our open-sided sampan boat. “We believe the eyes are a window to the soul, so by painting the eyes on, they’re giving the boats a soul. Then the boats help protect their owners — especially at night.”

Known locally as the Nine Dragon River, the Mekong has so many limbs that it’s easy to get lost in its anatomy. It writhes for 2,700 miles from China through Myanmar, Laos, Thailand and Cambodia until eventually erupting in Vietnam at its widest point, where I’m sailing its delta for three days. From Ho Chi Minh City, we’d driven two hours south west to a tiny jungle dock at Mo Cay near the point where the river drains into the South China Sea. The plan is to head deeper west into its tributaries to reach the Mekong city of Can Tho.

Boat tours are part of the river’s modern currency and hotels have taken root on its islands, but at heart the Mekong remains an agricultural region. Responsible for a third of Vietnam’s total agrarian output, the delta is the country’s biggest producer of rice, fruit and seafood. Life and water intertwine. Family tombs punctuate the rice paddies that unfold from riverbanks into farms that have been passed down through generations. Fishing communities subsist in pontoon shacks in its tributaries.

In Ben Tre province, where my boat has launched, coconuts are at the heart of life for entire communities. We motor past women hunched in their riverside front yards, husking their harvests with machetes. Open-sided barns are piled high with coconut husks and shells. There are over 220,000 acres of plantations in Ben Tre, producing 600 million coconuts a year. They’re exported as far afield as Japan and South Korea for their water, milk, flesh and fibres, but the riverbanks still resemble a hive of cottage industries.

“Mekong river culture has existed in Vietnam for hundreds of years,” says Jerry. He tells me that although he was raised in Ho Chi Minh City, he grew up visiting family in the Mekong, learning to swim in these tributaries using coconut husks as buoyancy aids, and feasting on coconut flesh as well as spiders, snails and turtles. “The Mekong was a very poor region in the past and people didn’t have many choices on what they ate,” he explains. In recent years, Vietnam’s government has instigated a programme to attract international investors to the Mekong, improving public infrastructure and living conditions, but Jerry says many things remain largely the same. “People do still eat turtle,” he says with a shrug.

Turtle certainly isn’t on the menu for travellers, but it isn’t long before I get to try the province’s ubiquitous coconuts. On the Co Chien River islet of Ho, I find Tan Kiet Nguyen halfway up a palm tree, his toes curled around the trunk as he reaches to twist off the fruit he’ll use to make welcome drinks. He and his wife, Thi Hang Huynh, are one of eight households on the tiny off-grid island that have banded together to diversify their fruit-growing incomes by offering garden tours and meals for visitors. “All the island kids learn to climb coconut palms when they’re around 12,” Thi Hang says, laughing, as I watch Tan Kiet shimmy back down the tree.

As the government pushes for development in the Mekong region, Ho is an example of life pushing against the tide — life is lived off-grid and there are no cars or motorbikes, just earthen paths winding through orchards of ballooning jackfruit and pomelos. Settled a century ago by a couple of farming families, the community has grown to 24 households. My tour of the island’s village weaves between family plots to hammock-strung homes where I sip tea the colour of sapphires, made from butterfly pea flowers. The Mekong is a river of life, and it makes sense to live with it.

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Clockwise from top left: Preparing coconut fibres at a riverside factory in Ben Tre province; locals use shallow boats to get around the Mekong Delta; coconuts are brought to market Previous pages: The fishing harbour on Son island





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Clockwise from top left: Tan Kiet Nguyen scaling a coconut palm on Ho island in the Mekong; a homemade feast cooked by villagers on Ho; the entrance to Phu Ly 1 Khmer Buddhist temple; farmers now act as tour guides on Ho

herbs and river prawns; and try fiery bitter-melon rice wine that's been brewed in a homemade earthenware pot still.

Ho's community has grown but the land it lives off has shrunk because of landslides — one reason why the residents are looking for extra income from travellers. The islet isn't alone in this battle. Land in the Mekong is routinely being eroded. Research from the Mekong River Commission, an intergovernmental body established in 1995 to monitor the region, shows climate change is making the delta increasingly fragile. Around 30% of this 15,560sq-mile region is below sea level and the forecast rise in global sea levels is expected to increase both the salinity and the risk of flooding in Vietnam's food bowl.

Rural ways

I get to see how closely delta life is intertwined with the water on a bike tour the next day, after a night on an island near the town of My Tho. Miles of durian farms, irrigated by the Mekong, line country roads. Residents fish from porches, French doors flung open to catch the river breeze. Some abandoned brick houses crumble into the flaking banks, wide cracks pulling them apart at the seams.

Not all Mekong communities live so close to the water's edge. Jerry wants to show me the region's Khmer villages, deep in the Mekong's Vinh Long province, two-and-a-half hours west of Ben Tre. Home to a large Khmer community — an ethnic group primarily based in Cambodia — the area contains one of Vietnam's most spectacular Khmer Buddhist complexes, the Phu Ly 1 temple. It's a 20-minute walk from the nearest river dock, and the stroll takes us through a village where groups of men lounge in front yards after work, cradling Saigon beer bottles and microphones, waiting for cues from tinny karaoke machines. We're less than two hours from the Cambodian

do with migration prompted by the civil war that tore apart Vietnam's neighbour from the late 1960s.

"They came here to build a community in 1653," he says. "The temple complex was originally built to house the community and protect them from tigers, crocodiles and scorpions." Only scorpions remain in the Mekong Delta today, but on arrival at the complex, its high walls still give the impression of a fortress. Just behind the blood-red gates is a 20ft-tall golden seated Buddha floating on a lotus, behind which is a series of temple halls, cremation rooms and quarters that sleep up to 200 monks at a time.

Vietnamese religious life is complex, often incorporating elements of Taoism, Confucianism, Buddhism, Cao Daoism and, in some areas, Catholicism — the latter largely due to French colonialism. But here at Phu Ly 1, I also spy the eagle goddess Garuda from Hinduism carved into temple walls and stone plinths bearing the three-sided heads made famous by Cambodia's Angkor Wat. A monk in a turmeric-coloured robe is setting up plastic chairs and 6ft-tall speakers are crackling to life. "Community festival," explains our host monk with a smile.

We're soon back on the river, and my final stop that night is the region's capital, Can Tho — the fifth-largest city in Vietnam, with a population of around 1.3 million. It hasn't always been so urban. "Ten years ago, Can Tho was just a rural district, but now we have hotels and nightlife," says Jerry, as our boat enters a water crossroads framed by high-rise hotels. The night-market stalls that line riverside promenades are lighting up like fireflies as dusk descends.

The city's Cai Rang district is famed for its floating market — a feature of Mekong life for hundreds of years. "Before the road network, everything was done by boat," says Jerry. Approaching the market from the river the next morning, I notice washing lines hanging outside many of the houses and rooftops (shaded with hammocks).

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“Mobile housing,” says Jerry, nodding to the makeshift living compartments — many of the people working here live permanently aboard their boats.

Long bamboo poles hang from the boats, displaying what’s for sale that day: onion, garlic and pumpkins, along with huge quantities of watermelons roped together. But the collection of sampans here are not exactly the vast floating village I’d read about before my visit. Development means this aspect of Can Tho life is slowly dying out, with more people shopping off the back of motorbikes than boats. “People want to move forward,” says Jerry emphatically, clearly choosing his words carefully. “But we feel really sad that this market probably won’t be here for our kids.”

Welcome to hell

My next stop is the Con Dao archipelago at the very southeastern edge of Vietnam’s borders. Like the Mekong, it’s a region on the brink of change.

As my plane comes in to land on the main inhabited island of Con Son, I’m greeted by the sight of a small flotilla of rainbow-coloured trawlers and squid boats, bobbing offshore like a thousand tiny satellite islands. High mountains covered in longan and bang nut trees line one side of the road from the airport while the other overlooks miles of empty beaches. Few tourists make it as far as these islands, but developers are starting to wake up to their potential. Close to the ferry terminal, builders are clearing seafront palms to sink concrete foundations for new resorts.

Even 30 years ago, it would have been unthinkable to have hotels on the island. “Con Dao used to be called ‘hell on Earth,’” says my young guide Thi Nhuan ‘Pumpkin’ Nguyen later that day. Wearing white trainers and a traditional conical hat, she leads me down quiet backstreets in Con Son town, where grand villas recall its French 19th-century colonists. Our destination is a notorious prison nicknamed the Tiger Cages — one of several built to house dissidents between 1887 and 1954, when Vietnam was part of French Indochina. In the 1950s, the prisons were inherited by the Americans during the Vietnam War. Now they’re protected as a national monument.

We enter Phu Tuong prison to find the air inside still and stale, the walls slick with mildew. Pumpkin’s father, born in 1959, might have ended up here if things had been different. “When he was young he was called to fight in Con Dao with the resistance, but he was an only son and my grandmother didn’t want him to go,” she explains as we ascend a flight of stairs to a platform above a row of open-roofed



Cycling through
a backstreet in
Vinh Long province





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how prison guards used the vantage point to throw a concoction of limestone and water into cells, gluing prisoners so they couldn't move.

Many Vietnamese were less fortunate than Pumpkin's dad. Fighters from all over the country went missing behind Con Dao's palm-flanked shores when the town was used as a base for interrogation, imprisonment and execution by the French and then Americans. At Hang Duong cemetery, I find 2,000 tombs — half of them unnamed, simply embossed with the five-pointed yellow star of the national flag. The mood among the crowd of Vietnamese visitors, however, is surprisingly festive. For this is the resting place of Vo Thi Sau, a national hero who's become synonymous with the islands.

Aged 14, Vo Thi Sau joined the growing guerrilla movement against French occupation. It was the 1940s and Vietnam was part of French Indochina. Eventually captured and convicted, at the age of 19 she became the first woman to be executed on Con Dao — three years before the start of the Vietnam War that ravaged the country until 1975. This grim fate has led Con Dao to become a pilgrimage site for thousands of Vietnamese each year.

Despite the cemetery's size, Vo Thi Sau's grave is easy to find, surrounded by a throng of people. Decorated like a shrine with her sepia portrait at the centre, it's lit by incense, festooned with chrysanthemums and piled with paper offerings in the form of mock handbags, combs and jewellery sets — all the accoutrements of young womanhood she might have enjoyed had her life taken a different course.

"We admire her courage," says one young woman mourner

A brighter future

Today, about a fifth of the island's inhabitants are still military, but Con Dao sees its future in nature tourism. Dirt tracks used only by hikers and the occasional motorbike taxi take me across the spine of the island to deserted pebble coves inhabited by shy black squirrels. One morning, I go clam collecting with a metal pail and an island guide, watching crabs skate across the sands as we trawl the beach with a bamboo rake. On a pontoon restaurant reached by boat, I eat Con Dao squid and crab fished out of open sea nets.

They may be eaten elsewhere but here turtles are the focus of conservation efforts. Little was known about their movements around the islands until 2017, when staff from the Six Senses eco-lodge on Con Son island's east coast discovered a female green turtle had come ashore to lay a clutch of eggs. The lodge immediately applied for a licence to run a turtle conservation programme and in 2018 became the only private-sector hotel in Vietnam authorised to help protect this 200-million-year-old species.

As luck would have it, I've arrived on Con Dao just as the final eggs of the season are hatching. "Normally, places where turtles lay their eggs have to be pristine. A mother turtle came to this beach six times this year, which is very good," explains Jun Nishimura, Six Senses' assistant sustainability manager. He leads me down wooden boardwalks beneath a dense jungle canopy to the lodge's mile-long swathe of sand. The hotel monitors the nesting with 24-hour beach cameras and the aid of local fishermen.

For conservationists, the turtles' (share with pride) they relocate


Above from left: Raking for clams on the beach at Six Senses Con Dao; a clutch of baby green turtles awaiting release

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egg clutches to a sheltered incubation zone that mimics their natural nest conditions. When I visit, I find a swarm of palm-sized baby turtles. “It’s a one in 1,000 chance of survival if left to nature,” Jun explains. While island tides, storm patterns, predators and fluctuating temperatures can interfere with nesting grounds, ocean plastics and fishing nets also await the hatchlings that make it to the sea. Although the islands are a national park, the protected zone doesn’t extend to the marine environment where the local communities fish.

The turtles’ first steps will biologically imprint them with this beach’s location, drawing the females back when it comes to laying their own eggs. “So far this year, we’ve had an 89% success rate with hatchlings, but it’s difficult to know what the survival rate is because they’re so small we can’t tag them,” explains Jun. “We will only know in 25 to 30 years’ time, if we see a mother return to this beach.”

Once the hatchlings are transferred to the beach by trained handlers, we wait. “They’re programmed to go to the ocean,” says Jun, his bare feet in the surf, a nervous grin on his face. The baby turtle nearest my feet pauses, flippers wiggling as if testing the breeze. Nature works its magic and it’s off. “Good luck buddy!” calls Jun, as we watch the tiny creature propel itself in an ungainly manner across the sand. If it’s anywhere near as resilient as the other locals around these southern waters, I’ve no doubt it’ll be back. 

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GETTING THERE & AROUND

Vietnam Airlines flies direct to Ho Chi Minh City from Heathrow, and offers multiple daily departures to the Con Dao islands from Ho Chi Minh City and Can Tho in the Mekong. Carriers including Singapore Airlines and Thai Airways also fly to Ho Chi Minh City with a stop. vietnamairlines.com singaporeair.com thaairways.com

Average flight time: 14h.

To explore the Mekong Delta, you’ll need to use boats, taxis and hotel shuttles. Con Dao has taxis and motorbikes to hire.

WHEN TO GO

November to February is the best time to visit southern Vietnam, with comfortable humidity and fewer downpours. In the Con Dao islands, turtle-hatching season is from August to November. Temperatures don’t vary significantly in southern Vietnam, with daytime highs in the mid- to late-20Cs. The southern monsoon season runs May to October.

WHERE TO STAY

The Island Lodge, Mekong Delta. From VND5.8 million (£185), B&B. theislandlodge.com.vn
Azerai Can Tho, Mekong Delta. From £185, B&B. azerai.com
Six Senses Con Dao. From £915 a night, B&B. sixsensescondao.com

MORE INFO

vietnam.travel

Lonely Planet Vietnam. £15.99

HOW TO DO IT

Brits can travel in Vietnam for up to 45 days visa-free under the country’s new visa waiver system. InsideAsia has an 11-night southern Vietnam itinerary from £3,300 per person. It includes four nights in Ho Chi Minh City, three nights in the Mekong Delta and four at Six Senses on Con Dao, some meals, all transport, some private guiding and activities, but excludes international flights. insideasia.com

Above: A devotee pays their respects to the gods at the hilltop Van

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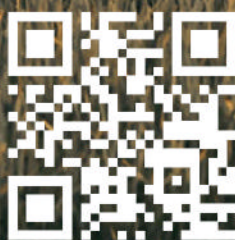
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KEEPING TIME



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AGE-OLD TRADITIONS RUN DEEP ON THE ISTRIAN COAST IN CROATIA, WITH
UNIQUE MUSIC, LANGUAGE AND DANCE STILL IN EVIDENCE TODAY AND ITS
PEOPLE PROUDLY WORKING TO ENSURE THEIR SURVIVAL FAR INTO THE FUTURE

WORDS: DANIEL STABLES. PHOTOGRAPHS: MATEJA VRCKOVIC





THE ROAR OF THE CROWD ECHOES AGAINST THE 2,000-YEAR-OLD ARCHES OF PULA'S ROMAN AMPHITHEATRE, CUT THROUGH BY THE METALLIC SCREECH OF SWORD ON SHIELD.

Two gladiators circle one another in the arena, kicking up dust with sandalled feet, sweat dripping onto the dry earth. They each take a few tentative swipes before one fighter connects with the crucial blow; his adversary staggers, clutching his side, then crumples in a heap of leather and steel on the floor.

For a split second the audience hesitates, unsure of what they've just seen. Then, the fallen warrior stands up, wipes fake blood from his brow with a grin and bows enthusiastically. "And now, we will enjoy a procession of the best haircuts in Ancient Rome!" the announcer proclaims over a crackling loudspeaker.

Proudly yet lightly — that's how the Croatian city of Pula wears its heritage. "Back in the first century, Pula was known as Pietas Julia," explains Vesna Jovicic, a local guide with long gunmetal hair and thick-rimmed purple sunglasses, when I meet her after the gladiator show at the arena. "Emperor Vespasian had a lover from Pula, called Antonia — a freed slave who became his companion after the death of his wife. He built the amphitheatre for her."

Much has changed in the intervening centuries. The amphitheatre now hosts the annual Pula Film Festival, while British band Florence and The Machine had graced its stage a few weeks before my arrival. In 2013, the arena even hosted the beatification of a saint, priest Miroslav Bulešić, who was murdered for his beliefs in the 1940s. Still, its ancient stones have stood firm while the political sands have shifted time and again around Pula and the wider region of Istria in which it sits. Despite, or perhaps because of, the mercurial political climate, Istria has developed vivid, proudly protected cultural traditions all of its own, in music, dance and languages. It's these that

The Istrian peninsula is the largest in the Adriatic Sea, spanning Croatian, Italian and Slovenian territory, with a Croatian county, also called Istria, making up 90% of its landmass. It came under control of the Austrian Empire in the 19th century, and Italy between 1918 and 1947. It was then part of Yugoslavia before becoming absorbed into the newly minted country of Croatia in 1991.

"I have a friend whose grandfather was born in Austria, his father in Italy, himself in Yugoslavia, and his son in Croatia — all without leaving Pula," says Vesna. "Governments come and go, but Istria just carries on being itself. Technically most Istrians are ethnically Croats, but other Croats say we're Italian. Both wrong — we're Istrian!"

Pula is Istria's largest city, and its naturally protected harbour has long made it attractive to invading forces, from the Romans and Franks to Napoleon and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Its streets are a picture book, telling the story of its varied history. Vesna points up a sloping street which leads south of the amphitheatre, where medieval houses covered in fading frescoes sit among Yugoslavia-era tower blocks and modern apartment buildings. "This street has a rock music cafe, a church, a sex shop and an amphitheatre," she says with a smile. "What more could you need?" Most of the buildings are hewn from gleaming white Istrian stone, an impermeable limestone which has been prized by successive invaders from the Goths to the Venetians. Around 90% of the buildings in modern Venice are made from it — a physical manifestation of what is, as I'm about to discover, a closely entwined cultural relationship.

As we walk through the old town, Vesna reminisces about the celebrities she'd seen in Pula on pride (shown with pride)

with pride (shown with pride) Taylor walking

Left: Women wearing traditional costume in Vodnjan, with pleated skirts, puffed sleeves and aprons
Previous pages: An aerial view of the city of Pula, showing the well-preserved Roman amphitheatre

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arm-in-arm with President Tito of Yugoslavia, her husband Richard Burton (who was playing Tito in the 1973 movie *The Battle of Sutjeska*) trailing behind. Tito loved Istria, spending four months of the year in villas on the Brijuni Islands, around five miles from Pula. Today, the islands are a national park, where peacocks wander wild and the rocky coastline is imprinted with the 130-million-year-old footprints of their ancestors, the dinosaurs.

Vesna takes me for lunch at the Amifteatar Restaurant — she wants me to try Istrian olive oil. “Pliny the Elder said it was the second-best in the Roman Empire,” she says, with a hint of pride. It’s aromatic and grassy, and, like all the finest olive oil, leaves a warming sensation in the throat. We enjoy it with bread and *pršut*, the jewel of Istrian cuisine: a cured ham dried by the bora, a northerly wind which buffets the Adriatic Coast in the winter months and lends the meat a soft saltiness.

Emanating from the restaurant speakers is a soundtrack of bagpipes, recorders and voices, intertwining along unusual-sounding scales: Istria’s unmistakable brand of folk music. Keen to learn more, I arrange to meet Dario Marušić after lunch, a musician who’s been at the forefront of the Istrian folk music revival for decades. He’s a tall man, with white, spiky hair, his silver earring the only clue to a rock ‘n’ roll-tinged past. “When I was 15, a friend lent me records by two English bands, Pentangle and Steeleye Span,” he says. “I was enchanted so I went to England to find out more. I was amazed that there were young people who looked like me, with long hair, rock musicians playing traditional folk tunes. I thought, why shouldn’t I do the same thing in Istria?”

Istrian folk music presents special challenges when it comes to fusion with Western styles, however. Unlike traditional Western music, which is based on a system of

tones and semitones evenly spaced within a scale, Istrian folk makes extensive use of improvisation and microtones — the notes that would fall in between the keys of a piano. “This music is very free — it’s difficult to understand for formal musicians,” says Dario. Classical composers have attempted to codify Istrian music into formal scales but the inexact spacing of the notes means they defy easy categorisation.

When Dario was asked to formally describe Istrian folk music for its inclusion on UNESCO’s Intangible Cultural Heritage list in 2009, he settled on ‘two-part polyphony in narrow intervals’. “It’s a mouthful, but it needs to be to describe it!” he says with a chuckle. “The polyphony refers to the two singing voices, characteristic of our music.”

I had listened to some Istrian folk music on YouTube before my trip. Woodwind instruments wrapped around dual voices, improvising in the microtonal way Dario had described. To ears like mine, used to a rigid system of tones and semitones, the constant use of microtones can sound dissonant or harsh. That much was evident from the video’s comment section, where one rather ungenerous observer had suggested the music sounded like “someone stepping on a cat”.

Istrian folk music is mainly found these days in its natural habitat, in the villages of the countryside. There are associations working to bring it to a wider audience, such as KUD Uljanik. I walk with Dario to Pula’s Forum Square, where the group is staging a performance. The artists — numbering around 20 — are dressed in traditional rural garb: the men in white shirts, leather waistcoats and knee-high boots, the women in flowing headscarves, white blouses and red pleated skirts. Musicians play bagpipes made from sheep stomachs and huge recorders

Clockwise from top left: The harbour at Rovinj, which dates back to the sixth century; former fisherman Edi Poropat in his traditional ‘batana’ boat; a street scene in Rovinj’s walled old town; the Croatian coast is home to many olive groves (this one near Pula is one near Pula)



into microtonal polyphonic singing. As the music unfolds, it begins to make more sense to my untrained ears. “This is just music with a different ABC, a different grammar,” says Dario. “But anyone can learn to understand it.” While the musicians play, the other performers dance, circling one another with arms linked, reminiscent of British country dancing.

After the performance, I get talking to one of the dancers, Vanja Fornazar, a woman of around 30. I ask her why she does it. “It started out as something fun — I just liked dancing,” she says. “But then it started to feel like something important, to preserve this traditional part of our culture.”

VALORISING THE PAST

The next morning, I hire a car and drive 20 minutes north through forested countryside to Vodnjan, a pretty town of imposingly tall Venetian, gothic and baroque houses. I visit one, Istrian de Dignan Ecomuseum, a preserved 200-year-old home, whose rooms bear the relics of both settlement and migration. Gnarly looking agricultural scythes and pitchforks are arrayed on a back wall; in a corner sits a collection of 1950s suitcases, placed there as if in anticipation of the need for a quick getaway.

“A symbol of the people who went away when the countries changed,” says Rosanna Biasiol-Babić, the museum’s manager. “Émigrés to Italy, most of them.” Between the end of the Second World War and 1960, as many as 350,000 Italian speakers fled the new Federal People’s Republic of Yugoslavia in fear of ethnic persecution by the government, an event known as the Istrian-Dalmatian Exodus. A silver statue of a Venetian gondola gleams on a cabinet. “Venice was always a dream for working people in Istria. They’d save up to go there on their honeymoon.”

We sit at a heavy wooden dining table and sip *vin de rosa*, a sweet, pink wine made with dried grapes. On the table next to us is a copy of *Vodnjan Tales*, a new series of graphic novels bringing the region’s rich folklore to life, featuring stories of inter-village rivalries and fearsome devils. Rosanna tells me the museum was set up in 2014. “To valorise the past,” she says proudly. I sense a touch of defiance infusing the nostalgia. This seems to be a widespread impulse among Istrians: a desire to preserve those cultural traditions which transcend lines on maps. A result, perhaps, of disillusionment with the region’s constantly shifting national identity.

Pula's Roman amphitheatre once hosted gladiatorial battles and is now mainly used as a concert venue





SHRINE OF FÁTIMA

Portugal, renowned for its breathtaking landscapes and temperate climate year-round, hosts one of the largest sites of faith, where one experiences unparalleled harmony and peace, an extraordinary destination not to be missed.

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I step outside into Vodnjan's main plaza, the People's Square, where another traditional music and dance performance is taking place, courtesy of the folklore group of the Italian Community of Vodnjan-Dignano. During the period of Venetian presence in Istria between the 12th and 18th centuries, Vodnjan became a more significant settlement than Pula, which was ravaged by a series of invasions and epidemics; as a result, there's still a greater proportion of people of Venetian descent in Vodnjan today. The costumes are influenced by Venetian dress from the 18th century; the men in black suits and red waistcoats, and the women in brocaded tunics, their hair carefully styled into waves.

The songs, meanwhile, are sung in Istroveneto, a dialect of Venetian which many of the performers speak at home. It's one of two Istrian languages influenced by the Venetian dialect; the other is Istriot, thought to be spoken today by only around 1,000 people, spread across six villages.

I get talking to one of the performers, a man of late middle age with a magnificent white walrus moustache, named Livio Belci — the erstwhile president of the folklore group. I express admiration for his costume. "It takes us two hours to get ready," he says. What's the motivation to maintain these centuries-old traditions, I ask. He twists his

doesn't know their past, they can't look into their future," he says, nodding sagely, before breaking into a wide grin. "Also, it's fun!"

SAINTS & SEA DOGS

The last stop on my cultural tour is Rovinj, a half-an-hour drive north. It's an impossibly pretty city of red-roofed Renaissance buildings, squeezed tightly onto a bulbous headland like the seeds inside a pomegranate.

As luck would have it, my visit to Rovinj coincides with the annual town festival — the feast day of St Euphemia — when traditional Istrian culture is at its most alive. Euphemia was a martyr from Asia Minor who was killed for her Christian faith in 303 CE. Her statue, including the breaking wheel on which she was tortured before being thrown to the lions, graces the top of Rovinj's baroque church. It sits on a rotating platform, doubling as a weathervane as it turns in the wind. Even here, in the realm of saintly meteorological reports, Istria's Italianate cultural predilections are revealed. "When she faces east, it means wind and rain," says my guide Mihaela Medić with a grimace as she shows me around the church. "But when she faces Italy, the weather is perfect."

There's a religious zeal in the air today. Euphemia's coffin, said to have washed up miraculously on Rovinj's shores in 800 CE, is housed in the church, and this is the one day of the year (when the people) can view it. My

From left: The city walls surrounding the town of Rovinj were built in the seventh century; a Vodnjan local in traditional dress selling Istrian krošule, sweet, deep-fried dough

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Left: The pretty Lim Channel, which runs for seven miles along a valley inland from the coast north of Rovinj



GETTING THERE & AROUND

EasyJet flies direct from Gatwick to Pula Airport between June and September. Ryanair flies direct from Stansted to Pula Airport between June and September. [easyjet.com](https://www.easyjet.com) [ryanair.com](https://www.ryanair.com)

Average flight time: 2h10m.

Pula, Vodnjan and Rovinj are all easy to traverse on foot, although their narrow streets are not always easily accessible for people in wheelchairs or with limited mobility. Distances are short in Istria and renting a car is the easiest way to get around, though there is a good bus network between many towns and villages thanks to the Arriva network. [arriva.com.hr](https://www.arriva.com.hr)

WHEN TO GO

Istria has a temperate climate, with warm summers and mild winters. Daytime temperatures in August hit an average high of 27C, while the coldest month, January, sees average highs of 7C. Spring is a lovely time to visit, with highs of around 21C in May.

WHERE TO STAY

Grand Hotel Brioni, Pula. From £200, B&B. [grandhotelbrioni.com](https://www.grandhotelbrioni.com)
Hotel Villa Valdibora, Rovinj. From €200 (£174), B&B. [valdibora.com](https://www.valdibora.com)

MORE INFO

Istria Tourism. [istra.hr](https://www.istra.hr)
Rough Guide to Croatia. £16.99

HOW TO DO IT

Completely Croatia offers a 14-night tour of Istria and the nearby region of Kvarner, including stays in both Pula and Rovinj, from £2,649 per person. Price includes flights from London, transfers and car hire, as well as B&B accommodation at a selection of luxury

curiosity gets the better of me and I join the queue of devotees. I get to the front and peer into a stone sarcophagus, shrouded with red velvet; in the middle, lined with rows of flowers, lies Euphemia, her skeleton now covered with a wax effigy and dressed in robes of scarlet and gold. I then do as I have seen the faithful do before me: cross myself, drop a votive offering of a few euros into Euphemia's collection box and raise my phone camera in salutation.

It's late afternoon when I leave the church and the sun has warmed Rovinj's white Istrian stone to a flaxen gold. I walk downhill along cobbled streets to the harbour, where another special festival event is taking place: a regatta of *batanas*, the traditional wooden boats which Rovinj's fishermen used for centuries to haul in the crabs, cod and sardines for which this stretch of the Adriatic Coast is famous. The boats are flat-bottomed — a necessity due to Istria's hazardously rocky coastline — and their name comes from the Italian *battere* ('to beat'), a reference to the characteristic slap they make on the surface of the water.

The regatta is a light-hearted affair, with no competitive spirit on show from the participating fishermen beyond a jovial play fight between the two frontrunners, who cross the finish line neck and neck. Many of the *batana* owners are former fishermen who offer tourist cruises to cover the cost of maintaining their boats. One of them is Edi Poropat, a grizzled sea dog with

stubble, who agrees to take me on a sunset trip around the harbour. I climb into his wooden boat and sit on a central plank as we head out on the water.

"Hand-in-hand with the *batana* goes the *bitinada*, a special way of singing for us fishermen, which made the time go quicker when we were working," says Edi, standing up to man the oars. "Our hands were busy, so some of us imitated instruments with our mouths, then one of us would sing songs about the sea over the top." He's too shy to give me a demonstration, but no matter — this being festival time, there are groups of *bitinada* singers giving live performances in Rovinj's bars tonight. I start to hear the music as we turn back towards the harbour; it sounds like a barbershop quartet, with the deeper voices, imitating basslines and drums, bouncing on the still evening air.

The sun sinks over the church as we row back into the harbour, with St Euphemia's statue, gazing west towards Venice, a voided silhouette against the pink and gold sky. It's the last night of the festival, and there's a carnival atmosphere in the air. It's a scene as timeless as the ancient stones of Pula's amphitheatre: children playing in the squares; cats stealing away from restaurant tables with scraps of fish. All the while the plaintive melodies and rhythmic bom-bom-bom of *bitinada* emanate from the harbourside bars, the *batanas* bobbing

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DISCOVER HIDDEN GEM IN ISTRIA

The breathtaking Baracija estate in Istria is on a hilltop amidst vineyards and olive groves and offers a magical retreat steeped in history. The estate was originally built in the 19th century and boasts organic vineyards, utter privacy, and serene surroundings. Enjoy tailored experiences with private chefs, fitness & spa facilities, a cinema just for you and remarkable nature. Explore a range of activities onsite and nearby, from unique wine tastings at Clai Winery to authentic gastronomic experiences in the beautiful restaurant, Stara škola. Preserving tradition and luxury, Baracija invites you to indulge in peace, tranquility, and serenity all year-round.

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A full-page background image showing a close-up of Antarctic ice. Large, jagged ice floes are visible, with several long, thin icicles hanging from the edge of a large ice mass in the upper right. The water is a deep, clear blue, and the ice has various textures and shades of white and light blue.

Icebound

AN INCREASINGLY FRAGILE PLACE OF BARREN SHORES LAPPED BY
BONE-CHILLING WATERS, ANTARCTICA IS HOME TO EVERY FORM OF ICE
— IN SNOW, GLACIERS AND BERGS — AND A SURPRISING AMOUNT OF WILDLIFE

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHS: MATT DUTILE

The frozen continent, once only the domain of valorous explorers like Ernest Shackleton and Roald Amundsen, has seen a rise in visitors over the past decade thanks to a spate of new expedition vessels. Travellers come to explore both the fragility and endurance of life in this inhospitable region at the southern end of the world. It's possible to lose hours on deck, watching the passing of giant icebergs or glancing down to find a view of penguin prints on the sea ice. There's a chance to get closer, too — to kayak amid chunks of ice in places like Neko Harbour or to take an inflatable Zodiac boat to shore, watching as Adélie penguins waddle between the water and their rookeries.



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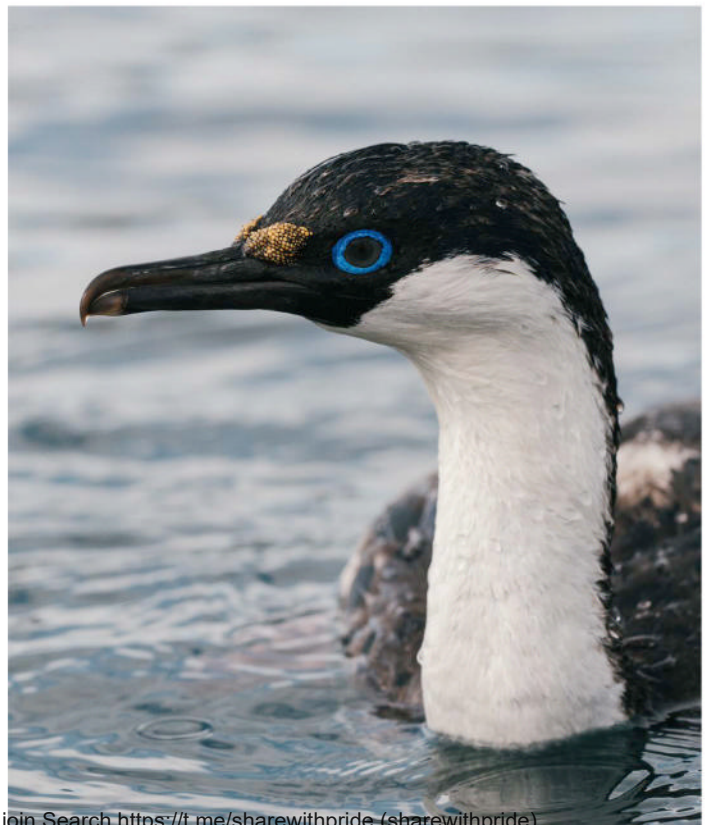
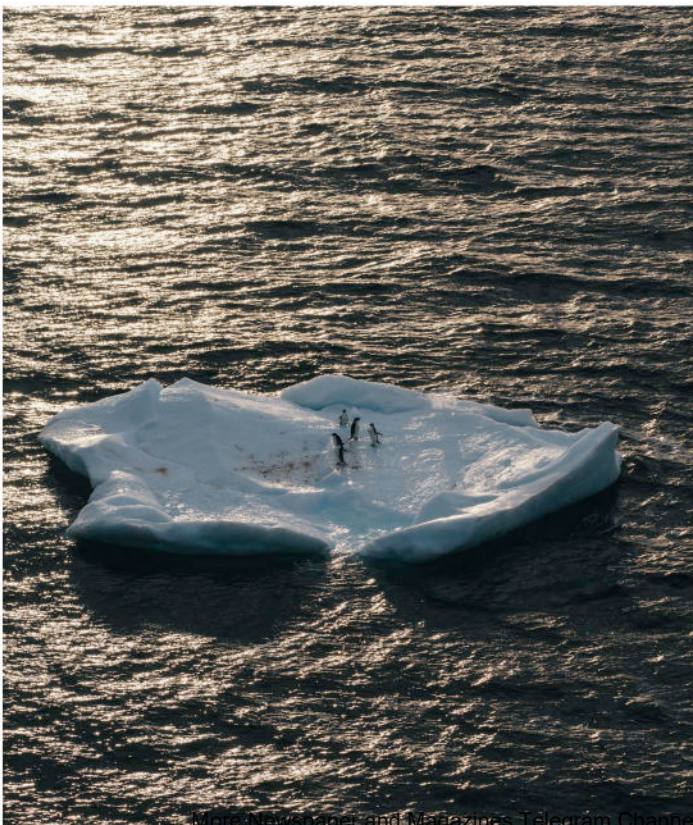


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Birds have perhaps adapted to and persevered in Antarctica better than any other animal: breeding, nesting and rearing their young on pockets of barren rock. Some, like the blue-eyed shag, never migrate and can dive to extreme depths in search of food. There are skua, gulls, albatross, petrels and more here, but no bird is more famous than the penguin. Short hikes over expansive ice fields allow visitors to admire their rookeries, such as those in Neko Harbour, built out of rocks by hundreds of gentoo penguins. While one penguin guards the nest, the others head out to sea to fish, pausing on bits of ice to rest or to escape predators.



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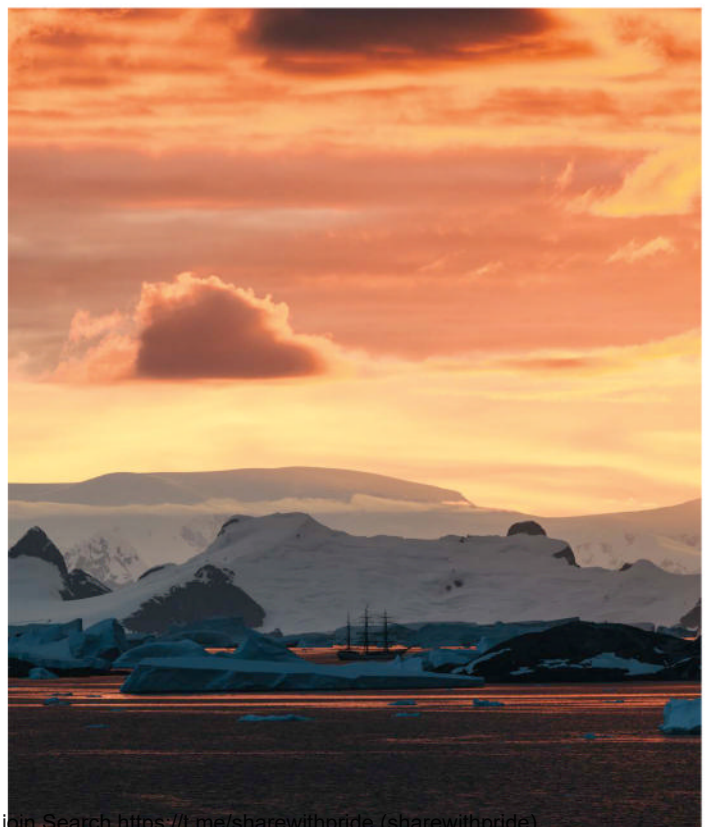
Brown Bluff, at the very tip of the Tabarin Peninsula, is where most travellers take their first steps on the Antarctic continent. Around 20,000 breeding pairs of Adélie penguins make their nests on the rocky scree under the imposing tuff cliffs, along with several hundred gentoo. Individual penguins will often hop to the top of larger rocks to survey the colony, and trumpet out calls soon picked up in a waving chorus by their peers. They make incredible leaps from the rocks back into the colony, before waddling off to their nearby mates.

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Deep in the continent, at the height of the Antarctic midsummer between December and February, the sun never sets. It will crest below the horizon for a few hours as the day ends, casting golden and pink light across expanses of ice, illuminating them in warm colours. The outline of other visitors to the region might appear between distant icebergs, from cruise ships carrying up to 550 people, expedition vessels of between 150 to 200 and masted sailing boats of a few dozen. Through the porthole of ships like the *Seabourn Pursuit*, passengers might catch a glimpse of the crew preparing to bring them ashore, for new adventures at the bottom of the world. 🟡



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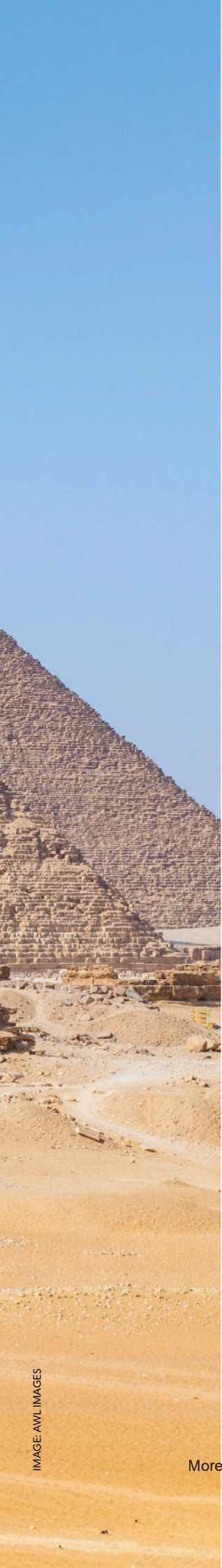
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Ami Vitale, who will be leading our Immersive Photography Program this November



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The Big Trip

Egypt

FELUCCAS DRIFTING DOWN THE RIVER NILE, ANCIENT WONDERS FOUND IN DUSTY TEMPLES, WARM WATERS FILLED WITH TROPICAL FISH: EGYPT REMAINS ONE OF THE WORLD'S MOST ATMOSPHERIC DESTINATIONS. WORDS: LAUREN KEITH

With millennia-old pyramids, hallowed temples and intricately painted tombs worthy of an art gallery, Egypt has a mindboggling amount of history on show. Some of the first threads of human civilisation started here over 5,000 years ago, and Egyptians still call their country *umm al dunya* — mother of the world.

Egypt offers the opportunity to time-travel like few other places. The past seems to keep careful watch over the present. The Pyramids of Giza — the last survivor of the original seven wonders of the ancient world — overlook cacophonous Cairo, the third-largest metropolis in Africa and the biggest in the Middle East. South along the River Nile, a temple built more than 3,400 years ago stands in the centre of the modern city of Luxor, which was once ancient Thebes.

The Nile flows through the hearts of most of Egypt's major cities. This blue-green ribbon keeps the ever-encroaching biscuit-coloured desert at bay, coaxing lush plant life amid the Saharan sands. Fly in a hot-air balloon over the west bank of Luxor to see just how abruptly the desert reasserts its dominance over riverbanks lined with date palms and green grasses. Or travel like royalty, following in

armies and merchants, on a scenic multi-day cruise along the Nile, making the temples and tombs between riverside Luxor and Aswan easily accessible.

Egypt's extensive pharaonic history takes centre stage for most travellers, but even more adventure awaits on a different waterfront, to the east along the Red Sea in the Sinai Peninsula. The three Abrahamic faiths — Christianity, Islam and Judaism — put great credence in stories said to have unfolded in the mountains of the Sinai. Most famously, Moses is supposed to have received the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai, and listened to God at the burning bush, where he was instructed to lead the Israelites out of Egypt.

These high peaks make a stunning backdrop for surfacing snorkellers and for scuba divers returning from explorations of the Red Sea. Beneath the water's surface, a bountiful aquarium of sea turtles, sharks and neon-bright fish dart around flourishing coral reefs that sprout along the sea floor and scale the vertical walls. Witnessing the wildlife of the Red Sea is one of the world's great underwater experiences, and pairing it with a Nile cruise allows travellers to experience the broad range

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ITINERARY ONE

1. Cairo
2. Luxor
3. Edfu
4. Kom Ombo
5. Aswan
6. Abu Simbel



ITINERARY ONE THE NILE VALLEY

Start point: Cairo • **End point:** Abu Simbel

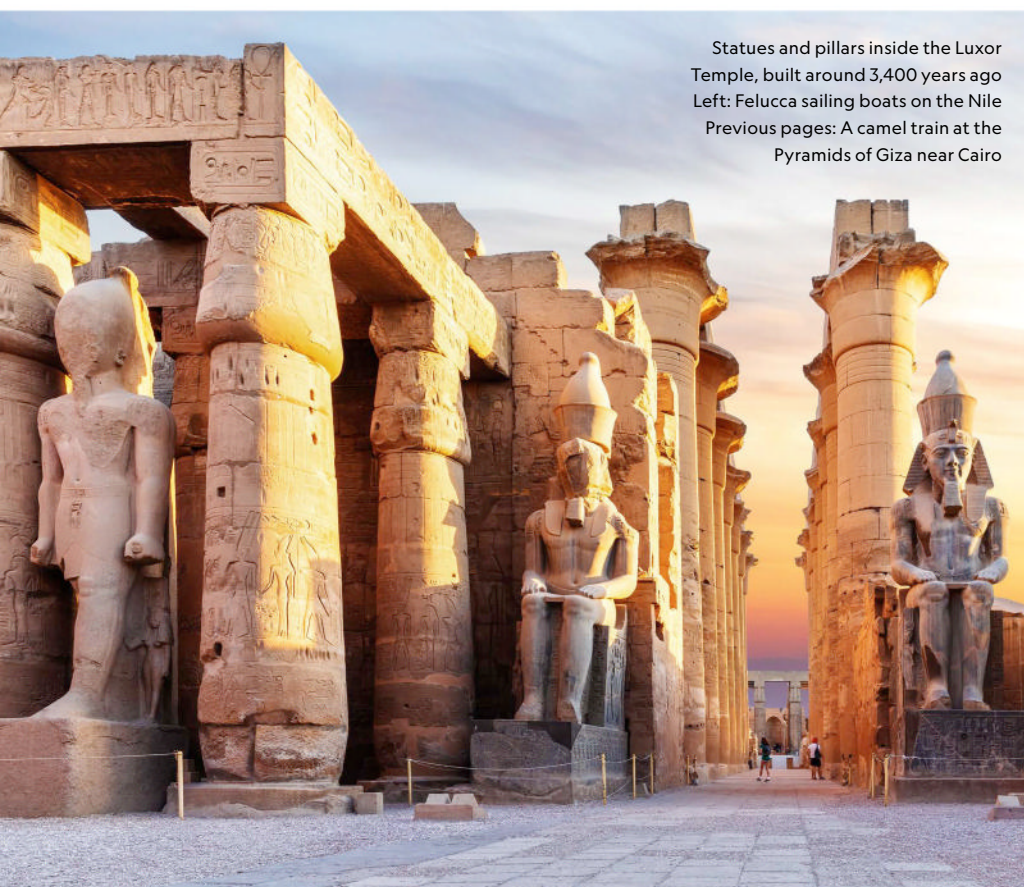
Distance travelled: 725 miles • **Average length:** 10 days

Herodotus, the 5th-century BCE Greek historian, famously called Egypt the ‘gift of the Nile’, but perhaps that description doesn’t go far enough. Egypt would be almost nothing without it. The river, the longest in the world, isn’t simply a watery artery stretching nearly 1,000 miles across the length of the country — it’s a genuine lifeline, and one of the world’s earliest civilisations wouldn’t have started here without its life-giving properties.

Ancient Egypt’s major temples and cities were located along the Nile’s fertile banks, called Kemet (‘the black land’) by its inhabitants. The fact that the river flows from south to north was key to the Egyptians’ worldview, with its focus on the daily journey of the sun between the horizons. The desert fringes on the Nile’s west bank — symbolically associated with the land of the dead — are where you’ll find most of the country’s tombs and pyramids. The ancient Egyptian idea of paradise, the ‘Field of Reeds’, was but a heavenly version of the real-life abundance of greenery along the Nile. Today, some 95% of Egyptians still live within a few miles of the water.

This itinerary, following the Nile’s course upriver on a boat cruise, has been travelled since the days of the pharaohs, and it remains the most popular way to explore Egypt, hitting all of the country’s major historic sites. To escape the crowds, slow down — linger longer in Luxor, dig deeper in Cairo and relax in Aswan. Egypt hides many more treasures beyond the Pyramids of Giza and the Valley of the Kings.

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Statues and pillars inside the Luxor Temple, built around 3,400 years ago
Left: Felucca sailing boats on the Nile
Previous pages: A camel train at the Pyramids of Giza near Cairo

HIGHLIGHTS

CAIRO

Dive into Egypt's chaotic capital. The Pyramids of Giza are the stars of the show, and the nearby Grand Egyptian Museum will be a blockbuster when it finally opens. For now, marvel at the 20 royal mummies at the National Museum of Egyptian Civilization and find the gold death mask of Tutankhamun, housed in the Egyptian Museum on Tahrir Square until the GEM is ready. visit-gem.com nmec.gov.eg egyptianmuseumcairo.eg

LUXOR

Take the train (around 10 hours, daytime or sleeper) to Luxor, built atop the ancient capital of Thebes. Big-hitters at this UNESCO site include the Luxor Temple and religious complex of Karnak, and the tombs of pharaohs in the Valley of the Kings outside town. Other nearby sites include the Ramesseum, whose giant statues inspired the poem 'Ozymandias', and the temple of the female pharaoh Hatshepsut. egyptmonuments.gov.eg thebanmappingproject.com

EDFU

Board a cruise boat in Luxor and spend the best part of the day sailing the Nile, with scenes of desert dunes and a shoreline punctuated with date palms unspooling outside your cabin. The standard first stop 70 miles upriver is Edfu, a tiny town with a few ancient temples.

KOM OMBO

The Nile crocodile takes centre stage at Kom Ombo, another 40 miles or around five hours' sailing from Edfu. Half of the unique 'double' temple is dedicated to Sobek, the crocodile-headed god of pharaonic power and fertility, and an intriguing museum of mummified crocodiles awaits at the end of your visit.

ASWAN

All cruises dock at Aswan, after two nights on board en route from Luxor. The Nile is at its most fascinating here. Take a felucca (small sailboat) to Gharb Soheil, a brightly painted village home to a few thousand Nubians, an Indigenous group that has lived in the region since pharaonic times. For sunset, have a drink on the terrace of the Old Cataract Hotel, made famous by Agatha Christie, who wrote part of *Death on the Nile* here. sofitel.accor.com

ABU SIMBEL

Abu Simbel sits on the shore of Lake Nasser, created by the construction of the Aswan High Dam in 1970. The temples were rescued from rising waters by moving them stone by stone to higher ground. Twice a year, the sun still illuminates the figure of Ramses II and two of the three gods in the temple's inner sanctum.

HOW TO DO IT: For a Nile cruise, try an operator such as Viking or board a smaller *dahabiya*, a two-masted sailboat; Nour El Nil has beautifully built

Q&A

Gihan Zakaria, co-founder of Dar Jan Farm & Art Space



WHY DID YOU CHOOSE TO SET UP YOUR FARM AND ART SPACE IN SINAI?

My partner and I toured Egypt on a road trip, visiting potential spots for our new home. We wanted a quiet spot to live in harmony with nature. What made us choose the town of Nuweiba, in the eastern Sinai Peninsula, was its location between mountains and sea.

Remote areas like Sinai often lack access to urban amenities, but Dar Jan serves as a hub, providing residents and visitors with a chance to engage in art and culture.

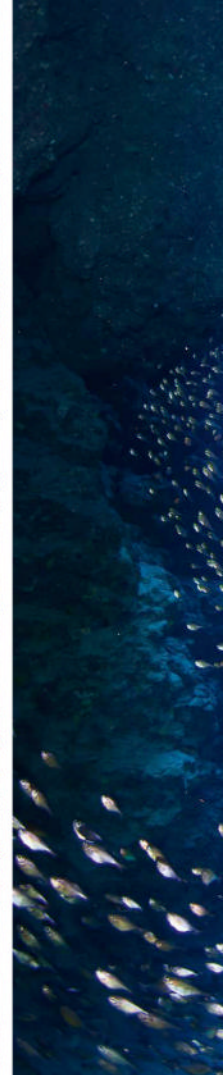
HOW DOES DAR JAN FIT INTO EGYPT'S WIDER ARTISTIC AND CULTURAL SCENE?

The art scene in Egypt flourishes predominantly in major cities like Cairo and Alexandria. However, unlike most art spaces in Egypt confined by urban structures, Dar Jan's nine-acre farm provides a setting where visitors can immerse themselves in nature — merging art, culture and wellness.

We also founded Tarfa Leathers, an initiative that teaches Bedouin women leather crafting. Producing high-quality leather products and selling them in local and international markets can secure a stable, fairly paid revenue stream.

WHAT OTHER ALTERNATIVE ART AND CULTURE SPACES IN EGYPT WOULD YOU RECOMMEND PEOPLE VISIT?

Place des Arts in Cairo and Nūn Art and Life in Luxor, which are both galleries and art spaces. We also hope to replicate the experience of Dar Jan in other remote regions in the country, such as the Siwa Oasis in western Egypt.



ITINERARY TWO THE RED SEA & SINAI

Start point: Sharm el-Sheikh • **End point:** Nuweiba • **Distance travelled:** 250 miles • **Average length:** 7 days

Egypt's best-known body of water is a river, but the Red Sea that stretches along the country's eastern coast guarantees some thrilling aquatic adventures of its own. Suitable for all levels of underwater explorers, from snorkellers to advanced scuba divers, the Red Sea is a technicolour dream world beneath its surface. There are a huge number of endemic fish — including species of elegant highlighter-yellow butterflyfish, neon parrotfish and shy clownfish lingering in finger-like anemones — and thriving coral reefs.

Sprawling resorts have taken up much Red Sea real estate around Sharm el-Sheikh, but the development and crowds thin out as you travel north. Just a few miles inland from the coast, Sinai's interior reaches for the sky, a sacred land of pilgrimage and revelations still lived in by long-established Bedouin tribes. Hiking trails climb to mountain summits and wind through valleys carved with centuries of graffiti left by visitors from the Nabataeans (of Petra fame) to the Crusaders, leading to secret wild swimming pools and small waterfalls.

This itinerary hits Egypt's superlative highs and lows — from the country's loftiest peaks to its deepest dive sites — as it traces the eastern edge of Sinai and traverses the peninsula's biblically connected mountains.

HIGHLIGHTS

SHARM EL-SHEIKH

When you need a break from sun, sand and snorkelling, Sharm has a couple of worthy distractions. The Sharm el-Sheikh Museum — the only such collection on the peninsula — has a digestible assortment of artefacts that span Egypt's history from the pharaohs to the Bedouin. At the heart of the Old Market, which, despite its name, is quite new, the Sahaba Mosque looks like it could have come from the drawing board of Gaudí, with spiralling brick columns and honeycombed minarets. egy monuments.gov.eg

RAS MOHAMED NATIONAL PARK

At the southernmost tip of Sinai, Egypt's first national park is blessed with incredible dive sites. Vertical reef walls have names that hint at the types of species scuba divers and snorkellers can see: Jackfish Alley, Eel Garden, Shark Observatory and Anemone City. Divers with advanced certifications can check the shockingly large concentration of shipwrecks and the contents that have spilled out on the sea floor. Sleep in a canvas tent on the beach within the park boundaries at Bedouin-owned

DAHAB

A chilled hangout spot for a curious mix of nomadic types — of both the digital and Bedouin varieties — Dahab is Egypt's most laid-back destination. Whitewashed cafes draped with colourful Bedouin-style rugs line the crescent-shaped bays, where flipped snorkellers waddle past remote workers clacking away on laptops. North of town, the Blue Hole is infamous for its underwater tunnel, the Arch, which has seen a number of fatalities over the years; it is a safe and popular spot for responsible snorkelling and diving outside of that.

ST CATHERINE

Sacred to Christians, Jews and Muslims, the UNESCO-listed area around St Catherine's contains the world's oldest continuously lived-in Christian monastery, watched over by majestic mountains that are some of the tallest in the country. No matter your religious beliefs, join a night-time pilgrimage, arriving to witness sunrise from the summit of Mt Sinai, or Jebel Musa (Mt Moses) in Arabic. Add on a day or more to walk with the local Jebeliya Bedouin through the neighbouring valleys that few outside visitors make time to see.



NUWEIBA

A small town with a laidback vibe and quiet golden beaches, one of Nuweiba's main attractions is Dar Jan. A passion project by a couple who left the big smoke of Cairo, the nine-acre organic farm north of town is unlike elsewhere on the peninsula. Travellers can join creative workshops, including organic agriculture and outdoor survival skills, and spend artsy afternoons of pottery, meditation and mosaic-making. You can stay overnight, too. [instagram.com/darjan_nuweibaa](https://www.instagram.com/darjan_nuweibaa)

HOW TO DO IT: Sharm el-Sheikh is home to Sinai's main international airport, which has flights with British Airways from Gatwick, and other UK airports on a variety of airlines. Sun-and-sand package tours will get you to a Red Sea resort, but you'll need to arrange your own tours and travel beyond that. Almost all hotels have on-site dive centres and hire out snorkelling equipment. Bedouin guides are required to hike in Sinai's interior. Contact Wilderness Ventures Egypt for desert excursions around Mt Sinai and St Catherine. [wilderness-ventures-egypt.com](https://www.wilderness-ventures-egypt.com)

From left: A typical beachside cafe on the Red Sea coast, at Ras Umm El Sid in Sharm el-Sheikh; a diver at Dahab Canyon, a classic Red Sea experience

ITINERARY TWO

1. Sharm el-Sheikh
2. Ras Mohamed National Park
3. Dahab
4. St Catherine
5. Nuweiba





Travellers on the Sinai Trail hike through a rocky valley in the Sinai Peninsula in eastern Egypt

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EYEWITNESS

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THE BEDOUIN

The Sinai Trail winds for 340 miles over mountains and through valleys but it's possible to get a taste of it on an overnight hike, experiencing life as the local Bedouin have for centuries

Not long after leaving the town of Nuweiba, in Egypt's Sinai Peninsula, the old-school white Datsun truck parts ways with the pavement, an abrupt final farewell to civilisation. My Bedouin driver barrels into the wadi, a dry valley with sheer, dark walls of towering granite mountains formed by long-extinct volcanoes that press ever closer the deeper we go. When we come to a halt, the cloud of dust that had been trailing the truck follows Newton's first law of motion and carries on obliviously without us.

The place where we stop seems monumental, but no signs mark the start of the Sinai Trail we're about to embark on. I stumble out of the truck, and Musallem Abu Faraj, my guide, hands me a plastic-wrapped red-and-white chequered *keffiyeh*. I drape it over my hair, and Musallem gingerly takes the folded edges of the square cloth and folds it in proper Bedouin style behind my head, nodding with fatherly approval at his work. Now that this essential ritual is taken care of, our journey can begin.

The Sinai Trail, Egypt's first long-distance hike at 340 miles, cuts in from the Red Sea to the peninsula's lofty mountains, including the country's highest peak of Mt Catherine at 2,629m. Launched as a community tourism project in 2015 by three local Bedouin tribes, the Sinai Trail has more than doubled from its initial 135 miles, and now eight tribes in the region lead hikers through their territories. In Egypt, where much of the tourist experience comes tightly pre-packaged, a locally run initiative such as this is a brilliant exercise — literally — in slow, immersive travel that preserves and places great importance on Bedouin heritage and knowledge.

Musallem, one of the trail's founding fathers, is part of the Tarabin tribe and has been guiding hikers in Sinai for nearly as long as the 35 years I've been alive. His expertise is unparalleled and widely known in the community. For several hours, we walk through wide, camel-coloured wadis, that spread through the mountains like lines on the palm of my hand, following a track invisible to my eyes but deeply engrained in Musallem's mind. His light blue *jellabiya* is rolled up slightly and tucked into the straps of his Osprey rucksack, showing the bottoms of his immaculately white and seemingly dust-free trousers.

Musallem reads the landscape as if it were his favourite book, eagerly pointing out the geology of the mountains and the names of medicinal plants with an infectious, child-like enthusiasm. He hands me a tiny leaf of super-sticky *samwa*, which has a strong scent like a cross between lilac and marijuana and is used by the Bedouin to treat bee stings and clean infections.

We pause for tea under a lone spiny acacia tree, and

sticks he's picked up off the ground. In a world of eight billion people, it's a surreal luxury to be where no one else is. This landscape feels so rugged and raw, as if I'm the first person to set foot on it. But many have passed before me. Even Moses allegedly spent more time here than I will, called to the mountains over 3,000 years ago. I don't consider myself a religious person, but there's certainly something magic in the mountains of Sinai.

Back en route, my mind wanders, but never too far. Hiking forces me to focus on the physical and the immediate — the strong Sinai sun on my back, the whisper of the wind urging me onwards, the swirls of stones on the ground put in place by water's now-invisible hand — leaving little space for anything else in my brain: 'trail therapy' perhaps. Walking is one of the first gravity-defying movements we master as babies, and especially out here in Sinai's raw, elemental hinterlands, it still feels like the most foundational of actions.

The sun has shifted to the other side of the sky by the time we reach Coloured Canyon. The concave rock walls of this narrow ravine swirl with a rainbow of hues — reds, yellows and even purples, which I've never encountered elsewhere in the natural world — as if an artist playfully swiped her paintbrush across a palette. The route twists and turns, and some parts of the slot canyon are so narrow that my hiking boot doesn't fall fully to the floor, necessitating some scrambling and squeezing, transforming the canyon walls into nature's climbing frame.

After about nine miles of hiking, we stop to make camp for the night, eating a surprisingly hearty dinner — given our limited supplies — and swapping tales around the fire. As the dancing flames diminish into glowing embers, I decide it's time for me to call it a night too. I curl up under heavy blankets, gazing at a starry sky so clear that it feels like a hallucination. With the lights extinguished, night descends like a curtain, and Sinai's silence is so deafening that it takes me longer than usual to fall asleep. We're certainly a far cry from the car horns of Cairo.

The following morning, Musallem and I pack up and move onward, one foot in front of the other, as all the generations before us have done and will continue to do after we've gone.

HOW TO DO IT: The entire Sinai Trail takes 54 days to complete, but it's possible to experience just part of it on a day hike if that's all you have time for. Bedouin guides are required for all sections of the trail. Check the website to get in contact with the organisation regarding guide availability and route recommendations based on your specific interests. The trail technically begins near the town of Nuweiba, but you can start anywhere along the route. <https://www.sinaitrail.net>

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Koshary is a popular street food with rice, macaroni, spaghetti and lentils topped with a tomato sauce, fried onions and chickpeas



ANCIENT EGYPT In numbers

33

Number of pharaonic dynasties in ancient Egypt, from Narmer around 3150 BCE to Cleopatra's son Caesarion in 30 BCE. Egypt was then gobbled up by the Roman Empire. The concept of dynasties is a modern scholarly construct, and the ancient Egyptians did not group their pharaohs in this way.

1,500

Number of named gods in ancient Egypt (some say up to 2,000). These range from major deities such as the sun god Ra and falcon-headed Horus to obscure ones such as the cartoon-like Medjed.

3

Seasons recognised by the ancient Egyptians (for flood, planting and harvest) each lasting four months.

The year had 365 days and each month had three 10-day weeks, with five days added at the end of the year for religious celebrations.

In 46 BCE, Julius Caesar had the innovation of adding a leap-year day every four years. Look for the hieroglyphic calendar carved into the temple wall at Kom Ombo.

64

Number of known tombs in the Valley of the Kings, which was the necropolis of the then-capital Thebes (modern Luxor).

From around 1500 to 1077 BCE, it was the burial location of some of Egypt's most famous pharaohs, including Tutankhamun and Ramses II.

KV17, the tomb of Seti I, is the deepest, largest, most decorated and most expensive to visit.

FIVE EGYPTIAN DISHES TO TRY

1 KOSHARY

At first glance, *koshary* is an odd assortment that shouldn't go well together: a heaped bowl of pasta, lentils, rice and chickpeas topped with fried onions and spiced tomato sauce. But all it takes is one taste to get hooked on Egypt's national dish. This carb-loaded vegetarian meal is often sold from street stalls.

2 FUUL MEDAMES

Another filling street snack, this thick stew of mashed fava beans seasoned with cumin, garlic, olive oil and lemon juice is often served from large copper pots. As street food, *fuul medames* is usually ladled into pitta bread and eaten as a sandwich on the go, but it's also a common guest at the breakfast table, served in a small bowl.

3 TA'AMEYA

Egyptians love their fava beans, so much so that the country's most famous street food is made from them. *Ta'ameya*, is made with it instead of chickpeas. This distinction makes Egyptian falafel a bright guacamole green on the inside and adds a bit more crunch to the bite.

Ta'ameya, is made with it instead of chickpeas. This distinction makes Egyptian falafel a bright guacamole green on the inside and adds a bit more crunch to the bite.

4 MOLOKHIA

The beloved dish of *molokhia* is a thick, gelatinous, forest-green soup made from chopped jute mallow leaves, garlic and coriander. For visitors to the country, it can be an acquired taste – the slimy texture is similar to okra. *Molokhia* is often paired with rice and rabbit dishes.

5 HAMAM MAHSHI

Pigeon is the main ingredient of a special dish that has been eaten for centuries in Egypt, and doves are still dotted around the countryside. Small squabs are stuffed with rice, onion and chopped giblets spiced with cumin, cinnamon and nuts. The birds are roasted and served with a spicy sauce.



Felucca boats sailing on the River Nile, at Aswan

A practical guide to travel in Egypt

Do I need a visa?

Almost all travellers, including visitors from the UK and the EU, need a visa to travel to Egypt. While it's possible to get a visa on arrival, it saves time at the airport if you apply online in advance. A single-entry tourist visa costs US\$25 (£20). If you plan to stay in the resort towns in Sinai for fewer than 15 days, you do not need a visa. Instead, you receive a 'permission stamp' in your passport when you land at Sharm el-Sheikh International Airport. While this option is a money saver, the list of places you're permitted to visit is quite limited — even Ras Mohamed National Park at the southern tip of Sinai is off limits without the full visa. visa2egypt.gov.eg

What should I pack?

Egypt is a majority Muslim country, so it's respectful for travellers to dress modestly. For all genders, this means covering everything between your shoulders and knees. You will likely be asked to cover up more if you visit a mosque or church.

The tap water is not safe to drink here so bring a water bottle with a filter, such as those from Lifestraw. lifestraw.com

Wi-fi ranges from infuriatingly slow to nonexistent across the country, even at five-star hotels. Get mobile data through your service provider at home or buy an Egyptian SIM card when you arrive. [egyptair.com](https://www.egyptair.com)

Can I pay by card in Egypt?

Cash reigns supreme but you can use a card at some higher-end hotels and restaurants. Take some Egyptian pounds out of a cash machine when you arrive, but be mindful of the fluctuating exchange rate and don't take more out than you need. For bigger expenses, consider bringing US dollars, the most — and sometimes only — accepted foreign currency.

Tipping, called *baksheesh*, infiltrates almost every interaction you'll have. It's customary to tip nearly everyone you come in contact with, even for services you don't want or require. Keep small change on hand for toilet attendants, porters, mosque caretakers and guards at temples and tombs.

Should I join a tour or travel independently?

Egypt has been a package-tour destination since the days of Thomas Cook, who first led a group to Egypt in 1869. The country is well set up for tour groups, and many first-time visitors find this option easiest, with guides and transport logistics arranged for you. Egypt's historic sites have little signage, making a tour guide a necessity for deeper understanding.

Nile cruises generally run between Luxor and Aswan in both directions, but a few make the long journey from Cairo. Trains, planes and buses connect cities along the Nile, and buses or internal flights can take you to the

GETTING THERE & AROUND

Egypt's main airport is Cairo International, with British Airways and Egyptair offering direct flights from Heathrow, and Egyptair from Manchester. From Luton, EasyJet and Wizz Air fly to Sphinx International Airport in the greater Cairo area. The Red Sea resort town of Sharm el-Sheikh is well served from the UK, including flights with charter airlines. ba.com egyptair.com easyjet.com wizzair.com
Average flight time: 5h30m.

WHEN TO GO

The best time for key Nile sites is between November and March, when daytime highs average 24C in Aswan. For the Red Sea, late spring and early autumn are ideal (32C). In winter, the sea can get chilly. Summer is a scorcher, with some areas reaching 45C or more.

MORE INFO

experienceegypt.eg

HOW TO DO IT

Responsible Travel's 12-day Nile & Red Sea tours take in historic sites on a river cruise as well as the Giza Pyramids and time on the Red Sea. Prices start at £2,249 per person, including guides, domestic travel, accommodation and most meals, but excluding international flights. [responsibletravel.com](https://www.responsibletravel.com)



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CITY LIFE

PHILADELPHIA

With a growing reputation for its diverse food scene, this US city offers nourishment for both body and soul in its patchwork of muralled neighbourhoods

WORDS: ORLA THOMAS. PHOTOGRAPHS: MATT DUTILE



Philadelphia is used to sharing the limelight. The birthplace of American independence, it was the United States' first capital until Washington, DC claimed the honour in 1800. Then there's the Big Apple, a hundred miles up the northeast coast, which has been stealing its thunder since, well, forever. But Philly is now taking centre stage. In the 2023 James Beard Foundation Awards — America's 'food Oscars' — the city scooped more accolades than any other in the country.

Along Philadelphia's grand, gallery-lined Benjamin Franklin Parkway boulevard, countless flags celebrate the many international communities represented within the city's neighbourhoods — these days, many of these residents are New Yorkers, who are moving here in their droves. "In New York, a lot of people are trying to be something they're not," says local chef Peter McAndrews, emerging from his kitchen to shake my hand. "In Philly, you can be comfortable — it's the place to find out who you really are."

My own quest for self-knowledge begins with lunch at his sandwich shop, Paesano's, in South Philadelphia. It has a timeless look, with black-and-white photos on the walls and a chalkboard menu. As it testifies, this city really loves a sandwich. Its best-known iteration is the Philadelphia cheese steak — a hoagie roll (sub) filled with sliced beefsteak and melted cheese — but you won't find one on the menu here. People from this neighbourhood tend to prefer the 'arista': stuffed with roast suckling pig, broccoli rabe, 'long hot' peppers and provolone cheese.

"I enrich the sauce with anchovies, like the Romans used to," says Peter. His menu is packed with Italian flavours, reflecting the heritage of the community it serves, while the restaurant's name is a nod to the close-knit vibe of the area ('*paesano*' means 'fellow countryman'). Immigrants from Abruzzo and Sicily established the outdoor Italian Market here on South 9th Street in the 1950s, and it

neighbourhood businesses — like Di Bruno Bros deli — are owned by third- or fourth-generation Italians. Sitting alongside are Jewish shops and Asian supermarkets, the legacy of subsequent waves of immigration. "This area draws many different peoples and cultures together as one," says Peter. "We're a family."

Stepping outside, I'm struck by the contrast between this neighbourhood and the gridded streets of downtown I'd visited earlier, with their soaring glass tower blocks, stately civic buildings and wide, uncrowded pavements. Here, contrails of sweet-smelling smoke from a kettle corn (sweetened popcorn) vendor drift over the busy market. Passing stalls piled with rosy apples and gleaming aubergines, I watch nonnas select the best for their baskets. As I head south, shopfronts change, handwritten signs switching from Italian into Spanish. Instead of olive oil and balsamic vinegar, windows display frilly dresses for communion and *quinceañera* — the Latin American party traditionally held when a girl turns 15.

THE POWER OF FOOD

Every shared meal is a kind of celebration, says Cristina Martinez, owner of South 9th Street restaurant Casa Mexico, pulling up a chair. "When we gather to eat, our energies are united," she says, beaming. "Family inspires all my cooking." Spread before us on one of the brightly coloured tables are some of her favourites — homemade tortilla chips and guacamole, chicken served in a peanut *mole* sauce. Ceramic dishes like the ones she's used in their preparation are heaped on the floor in an informal display, while strings of Mexican flag bunting hang from the ceiling.

Food can also be political, as Cristina's story shows. After arriving in the US undocumented, she sold tacos from a pushcart — a business that evolved into her first restaurant: South Philly Barbacoa. Its success — it featured on the Netflix series *Chef's Table*

Love letters

The founder of the Province of Pennsylvania, William Penn, named Philadelphia using the Ancient Greek words for 'love' ('*phílos*') and brother ('*adelphós*') — hence its nickname 'the City of Brotherly Love'

Clockwise from top: Inside the Jinxed antique furniture store on Fishtown's Frankford Ave; a roast pork sandwich with long hot peppers at Paesano's; posing for a portrait along the rainbow walkways of Philadelphia's Gayborhood
Previous pages: The Philadelphia skyline, with the Delaware River (above)



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Omar Tate and Cybille St Aude-Tate, owners of Honeysuckle Provisions. Clockwise from right: The entrance to Elfreth's Alley and its classic home fronts; the Emily Room at the Guild House Hotel; the deli counter at Di Bruno Bros in the Italian Market



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WHAT ARE YOUR TOP TIPS FOR VISITORS?
I really love Fiorella (fiorellaphilly.com), a tiny pasta bar in a former sausage shop in the Italian Market. I would bury myself in a bowl of their rigatoni every day if I could – that and wine are the only reasons I work out. I also enjoy the medical oddities on display at the Mutter Museum (muttermuseum.org).
fridaysaturdaysunday.com

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we're doing our job right," says Robert Perry, who wears cool, thick-rimmed glasses and his grey hair in a quiff. He admits to being the owner only when pressed. "I'm the guy with the key to the door, but you're the one making this space," he insists.

Robert means this quite literally. The upstairs room at 'TMom's' is decorated with 25 years' worth of stickers and graffiti — everyone who's ever partied here apparently having left their mark. Downstairs is ornately eclectic — a look Robert describes as "grandma on acid". Dodgem cars sit alongside palatial wingback armchairs, an octopus chandelier hangs from the ceiling. Moodily lit, it feels like a stage set for mischief. Events here like the 'drag brunch' showcase local performers, and even the cocktail list veers towards the theatrical — Pickletinis (vodka and pickle juice) come in labelled-and-lidded jars, and vodka-cranberry is poured into a candyfloss-filled martini glass to make the Cosmo Cloud. "The coolest thing about Philly is that it contains so many little worlds," says Robert, sliding me a drink across the bar. "Ours is a city of neighbourhoods."

There's one more I want to visit — one that first captured my imagination aged 11, every time I heard Will Smith's Fresh Prince of Bel-Air rap about "chillin' out, maxin', relaxin', all cool" at the start of each episode of his West Philadelphia-based sitcom. It still has that vibe today. Porched houses line wide, sleepy streets, where an occasional streetcar trundles past. Since the 1990s, the neighbourhood has acquired a new claim to fame as a hub for

grocery store and cafe Honeysuckle Provisions, which opened last year and was almost immediately named one of the best new restaurants in the US by food website Eater.

Chef-couple Omar Tate and Cybille St Aude-Tate are on a mission to celebrate Black culinary traditions and bring the best Black farmer-grown produce to West Philly. "We want to be intentional about food but make it relatable," says Cybille, who has botanically tattooed forearms and a broad smile. "We're not Black history experts but we teach people what we grew up with, helping to build connections between cultures." Both have food memories evident on the menu — Cybille contributing a spiced bun made with *chanm chanm*, a classic street food from her native Haiti, made from ground corn and peanut powder; while Omar's selection of 'dolla' hoagies are a love letter to the great Philadelphian sandwich.

Although both are instinctive innovators, Cybille and Omar understand the power of nostalgia and ritual when it comes to food. Their fried fish hoagies are served only on Fridays, when people flock from all over the city to get their hands on one. I wait for mine at one of three tiny tables, my eyes roaming shelves lined with wooden sculptural heads and books, including one titled *Food Power Politics*. My sandwich arrives: a homemade seeded roll bursting with crispy, creole-fried whiting — lemon and herb remoulade spilling copiously onto my hands. Lunch has rarely made me muckier — or happier. In a city that prides itself on inclusion

INSIDER TIPS

To get a taste of Philadelphia's restaurant scene without committing to a full meal, book a food tour with Jacqueline 'Chef Jackie' Kelly. Choose from an itinerary focused on the Italian Market, a multicultural tasting tour, or a circuit of the gastropubs mentioned in the Michelin guide. streetsofphillyfoodtours.com

Created by folk artist Isaiah Zagar, Philadelphia's Magic Gardens are a startling mix of mosaic and sculpture. Avoid the crowds on an early-hours Morning Magic Tour. phillymagicgardens.org

See if there's a Midnight Pasta Party happening while you're in town. Natalia Lepore Hagan is a Broadway actress-turned-chef who hosts regular pasta-making events at part of her Culinary Collective in Bridesburg. culinarycollective.co

An easy day-trip from Philadelphia, Lancaster County is the heart of Amish country. Learn more about the community's way of life at one of the area's many Amish-owned attractions, including farms.

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A terrine of duck tenderloin, chicken oyster, prune and foie gras at Her Place
Clockwise from left: Typical streetside vendors on 9th Street at the Italian Market; chef-owner Amanda Shulman poses for a portrait alongside the evening's menu in Her Place; Michael Webb's Tree of Knowledge mural





robertopatti.it

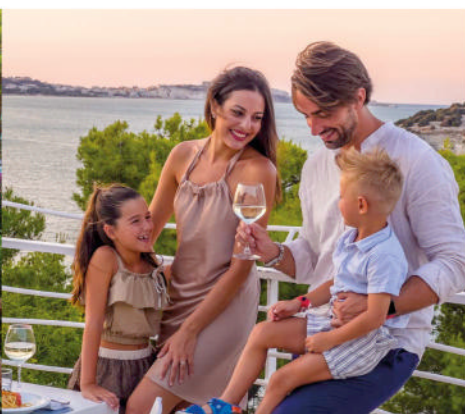
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#WEAREINPUGLIA



**Lisa Scottoline,
local author**

Philadelphia

Philadelphia's Old City (part of its Historic District) is home to an extraordinary density of National Historical Landmarks, including the Liberty Bell, a hallowed symbol of US independence. Head 15 minutes east to stroll the cobbles of America's oldest residential street, Elfreth's Alley (1705): a picturesque row of Federal and Georgian houses that are still occupied today. Then take a cab to the Philadelphia Museum of Art, featured in the hit 1976 film *Rocky*. Every day, countless visitors copy Sly Stallone's titular pugilist by racing up the 72 stone steps of its East



The salatim (salad) platter of pita, hummus and various roasted, smoked and pickled vegetables at Laser Wolf

4PM

EXPLORE FISHTOWN

Historically the centre of Philadelphia's fishing industry, this neighbourhood on the Delaware River has become a hub for young creatives. Follow Frankford Avenue and you can't go wrong — it strings together an apparently endless supply of cool small businesses. Pick up a coffee at premium roaster Persimmon, then disappear inside the cavernous Jinxed: a shoppable museum stocking everything from antique maps to Tiffany-style lamps. Head north past various vintage stores until you hit eclectic and super-friendly boutique Downerss, which sells women's clothing and interiors *objets*. persimmoncoffee.com jinxedstore.com downerss.com

6PM

DRINK PENNSYLVANIA WINE

Urban winery Mural City Cellars sources its grapes from a 300-mile radius of the city and commissions local artists to design the labels. Winemaker and sommelier Nicholas Ducos is often on hand to recommend a fresh new drop to go with a build-your-own cheese or charcuterie board. Its whites and rosé are particularly strong, as are bubbles like 'pét-nat' ('Pétillant Naturel', French for 'naturally sparkling'). Its warehouse bar on Frankford Ave is buzzy on weekends. muralcitycellars.com

8PM

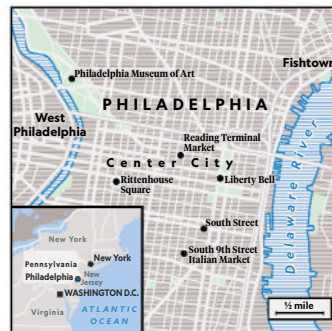
HAVE DINNER AT LASER WOLF

One of the city's most coveted tables is at this Israeli-style *shipudiya* (Hebrew for 'skewer house') in Fishtown that's named after the butcher in Jewish musical *Fiddler on the Roof*. Its menu is packed with meat cooked over charcoal — plus flavour-packed vegetables like shawarma-spiced cauliflower and royal trumpet mushroom *shishlik* (skewers). An open kitchen adds to the convivial atmosphere, as do huge windows and high ceilings strung with paper lanterns and trailing plants. Don't miss out on characterful cocktails like rum punch Charred for Life. laserwolfphilly.com

10PM

CATCH A SHOW AT CHRIS' JAZZ CAFE

Responsible for helping to create legends such as John Coltrane, Dizzy Gillespie and Billie Holiday, Philadelphia has serious jazz pedigree — so finish up with a nightcap at one of Center City's best-loved live music venues, which this year celebrates its 35th year. Low-lit and wood-paneled, the space has a sense of reverential intimacy, with draught beers and old-school spirits served at the bar (as well as a stage-side set menu). Students from the city's many music schools fill the audience, and the performers are often real raconteurs.



GETTING THERE & AROUND

American Airlines and British Airways have daily direct flights from Heathrow to Philadelphia. aa.com ba.com

Average flight time: 8h.

Philadelphia is a compact and mostly flat city, so it's possible to explore mainly on foot or by using the official bike-share programme. rideindego.com

For longer journeys, book a taxi or use the city's buses, streetcars (trams), subways and trains. septa.org The PHLASH bus loops around most major sites. ridephillyphlash.com

WHEN TO GO

Philly gets its best weather in spring and autumn, with an average temperature of 18C in May and 21C in September. With July highs of 32C, summer can be hot — and busy, with kids on field trips flocking to see key US history sites. Although January and February are colder, with average lows around zero degrees, they're easier months for restaurant reservations.

WHERE TO STAY

Loews Philadelphia Hotel, Center City. Doubles from £150, room only. loewshotels.com
Guild House Hotel, Center City. Doubles from £230, room only. guildhousehotel.com

MORE INFO

discoverphl.com

Philadelphia & The Countryside £8.99

HOW TO DO IT

British Airways Holidays has three nights staying at the Wyndham Philadelphia Historic District, which is a five-minute walk from the Liberty Bell, with flights from the UK included in the price, from £799 per person. ba.com/holidays

CELEBRATE **DISCOVER** EXPLORE



Historic Downtown Natchitoches



Oakland Plantation



Cane River Lake



Louisiana Sports Hall of Fame



Front Street Shopping



Fort St. Jean Baptiste
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Natchitoches Meat Pies



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Natchitoches (Nak-a-tish) is home of the Cane River Creole National Historical Park, Cane River National Heritage Area, Kisatchie National Forest, award-winning Louisiana Sports Hall of Fame and Northwest Louisiana History Museum, Natchitoches meat pies and much more.



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Natchitoches.com





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CITY LIFE

BIRMINGHAM

Multicultural, industrious and in an ongoing battle for the title of England's second city, the West Midlands' capital flaunts its heritage with style

WORDS: RICHARD FRANKS. PHOTOGRAPHS: BEN ROWE

Everything changed for Birmingham with the arrival of the Commonwealth Games in 2022, the biggest in the event's history. With athletes and delegates from 72 nations descending on the region and more than 1.5 million tickets sold, it gave England's second city a chance to prove its mettle on the world stage. And so it did. The opening and closing ceremonies rolled out Birmingham's multifaceted past, proudly celebrating the city's long-standing multicultural residents — often referred to as 'Brummies' — and manufacturing heritage as reggae, rock and grime artists shared the stage.

It's no surprise that this former industrial powerhouse chose to showcase its roots. From around the 16th century, the city became lauded for its metal-working industry, earning it the nickname of the 'workshop of the world' by the 18th century. It then became home to two of the UK's biggest car manufacturers: Jaguar and MG Rover.

Today, the residents of Birmingham are down-to-earth and self-deprecating, but the city has had its fair share of fame. Novelist and lecturer JRR Tolkien grew up in King's Heath, in the south of the city, at the end of the 19th century and later cited the area as inspiration for his books. During the same period, the real-life Peaky Blinders criminal street gang rampaged around Birmingham; they would go on to be the inspiration for the blockbuster period television drama that now

Birmingham's industrial prowess lasted well into the 20th century, but eventually waned as British manufacturing was scaled back from the 1970s. However, its heritage is still on show in pockets of the city, namely along the snaking canal network, which was cut in the 18th and 19th centuries to transport heavy goods in and out of the region by narrowboat. Now, many of the waterways have become urban parks used by joggers, cyclists and kayakers.

In Digbeth, the former Bird's Custard Factory is now a creative digital business complex home to independent bars, shops and a cinema. In the Jewellery Quarter, where 40% of the UK's jewellery is still made today, former factories have been repurposed as hotels, trendsetting restaurants and social enterprise spaces. The regeneration of public squares in the city centre, meanwhile, has seen historic neoclassical architecture like Birmingham Town Hall blend in seamlessly in Paradise, a sleek development mixing business space and leisure facilities.

Steady gentrification has also seeped into the dining scene. While the city has long been lauded for its authentic South Asian cuisine, especially around the Balti Triangle, what's less well known is that Birmingham has five Michelin stars, more than any other English city outside of London. It may not shout about its achievements, but Birmingham's official

Left: A striking wall mural on Meriden Street in Digbeth

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SEE & DO

ROUNDHOUSE BIRMINGHAM KAYAK

TOURS: Birmingham's canal network was first engineered in the 1700s to transport heavy goods such as coal and iron. Today, the waterway's distinctive 19th-century brick Roundhouse, originally used as stables and store houses, has been revamped in collaboration with the National Trust and Canals & Rivers Trust as a base for tours. Pop into the Grade II-listed building's visitor centre in the heart of the city centre before joining one of its unique kayak trips, offering a duck's-eye view of popular landmarks such as the historic Gas Street Basin, and areas that are inaccessible by foot. roundhousebirmingham.org.uk

SAREHOLE MILL & MOSELEY BOG: It's hard to believe that a young JRR Tolkien drew inspiration for *The Hobbit* and *Lord of the Rings* when living just five miles south of Birmingham city centre, but it's true. Tolkien often visited the grounds surrounding Sarehole Mill, a 250-year-old working watermill in Hall Green, which he later said inspired Middle Earth. A five-minute walk away is Moseley Bog, an ancient forest with gnarled trees and walking trails, which was the inspiration for the Old Forest, on the edge of the Shire. birminghammuseums.org.uk/sarehole-mill

POSITIVELY BIRMINGHAM: These fun walking tours, led by local authors and photographers, tap into topics ranging from the city's Victorian heritage to its role as the backdrop for the hit TV series *Peaky Blinders*. Tours run Friday to Sunday and take in street art, filming locations and city landmarks, like the Library of Birmingham and Black Sabbath Bridge. positivelybirmingham.co.uk

ASTON HALL: This Grade I-listed Jacobean red-brick mansion across the road from Villa Park, home of Aston Villa FC, remains one of the finest standing examples of 17th-century architecture in the city. It also claims to be one of the UK's most haunted buildings. Combine a visit to its rooms with a tour of Villa Park. birminghammuseums.org.uk/aston-hall avfc.co.uk

JEWELLERY QUARTER: Birmingham's

19th-century industrial prowess gave it the nickname the 'workshop of the world', so for a window into its heritage, visit the city centre's Jewellery Quarter. Here you'll find Europe's largest concentration of jewellers in a district where the original FA Cup, the whistles used on *RMS Titanic* and, at one point, 75% of the world's pen nibs were manufactured. Now, many of the Jewellery Quarter's warehouses have been repurposed as bars, museums and restaurants, all sprawling out from its centrepiece, St Paul's Square.

CADBURY WORLD: Britain's favourite chocolate maker turns 200 this year, and what better way to celebrate than with a visit to its factory? Just 13 minutes from New Street Station by train, Cadbury World's home is the historic Bournville model village, where cottages, schools and sports facilities were built in 1893 by the Cadbury family for its workers. Today, Bournville remains a blueprint for British model villages and its immersive factory tour tells the brand's story through interactive displays, actor appearances and, of course, tastings. cadburyworld.co.uk

IKON GALLERY: This nationally important artist-led gallery has one goal: to make art accessible for the people of Birmingham, free of charge. Ikon turns 60 this year and has been in its current neo-gothic city centre building on Oozells Square — a spot famous for its cherry blossom display in spring — since 1997. Recent exhibitions have showcased the works of photographer Vanley Burke and painter Mali Morris, among others. ikon-gallery.org

PARKS & GREEN SPACES: With more than 8,500 acres of parks and gardens to explore, Birmingham is a much greener city than its industrial past would lead you to believe. Locals' favourite park is Cannon Hill, a 15-minute bus ride south of the centre, which is home to the Midlands Arts Centre, an outdoor amphitheatre, boating lake, tennis courts and mini golf. cannonhillpark.co.uk

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Tick tock

Nicknamed Old Joe, the world's tallest free-standing clock tower is situated on the University of Birmingham campus. Officially called the Joseph Chamberlain Memorial Clock Tower, it stands proud at 328ft high — taller even than London's Big Ben

Clockwise from top left: Glen Sewell outside his shop La Mons Jewellery in Birmingham's Jewellery Quarter; views over Birmingham city centre from Staying Cool at Rotunda; Swordfish Records, one of the city's



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Clockwise from top left: An aerial view of New Street Station; the loaded vegetarian breakfast at Cherry Reds cafe; Street art pops up in unlikely places around Birmingham city centre; the vintage interior of Cherry Reds; a chef at work in the kitchens of Michelin-starred Simpsons restaurant

BUY

BIRMINGHAM MUSEUM & ART GALLERY:

Following a lengthy refurbishment, BMAG's main galleries are undergoing a phased reopening in time for this summer. Head to its shop for products by local creatives, such as Stacey Barnfield's Birmingham Colour Palette prints, and Punks & Chancer's t-shirts emblazoned with the Brummie endearment 'bab'. shop.birminghammuseums.org.uk

SWORDFISH RECORDS: Swordfish is a shop tucked away on the city centre's northeastern edge, but is worth the effort — it's been a city mainstay since 1979. Most genres are catered for here but there's nothing more quintessentially Brummie than flicking through the crates and going home with a Black Sabbath record. swordfishrecords.co.uk

MOSELEY FARMERS' MARKET:

Birmingham is surrounded by working farms that supply a handful of regular farmers' markets. Perhaps the most popular is this one, held on the final Saturday of each month in the village of Moseley to the south, where all the food and drink for sale is grown, reared or produced no more than a few miles away. Local craftspeople often sell products such as jewellery, ceramics and textiles here, too.

moseleyfarmersmarket.co.uk

LIKE A LOCAL

ST MARTIN'S RAG MARKET: It's a rite of passage for young Brummies to visit the Rag Market — usually taken by grandparents seeking a bargain — with everything from textiles and homewares to food and jewellery for sale across 350 stalls. Birmingham was first granted permission to hold a market on this very site in 1166, making it a piece of city history. birmingham.gov.uk

EDGBASTON RESERVOIR: Birmingham is about as far from the sea as you can get, so Edgbaston Reservoir is where locals retreat to when they want to be by the water. Come for sailing, rowing and standup paddleboarding — just a five-minute taxi ride, or a 30-minute walk, from the city centre. There's also a 1.75-mile trail you can walk around the edge. birmingham.gov.uk/reservoir

BEARWOOD: While the likes of Moseley, Stirchley and Digbeth find themselves on neighbourhood cool lists, Bearwood has been quietly fizzing away. The suburb tips over Birmingham's northwest border into Sandwell and has become known for a burgeoning Latino food scene. Try Brazilian butcher-cum-restaurant BrasilPortu and the family-owned A La Mexicana. brasilportu.uk

EAT

£ SHABABS: The balti was invented in the 1970s by a Pakistani-Brummie restaurateur whose speedy method of cooking and serving the dish in the same flat-bottomed wok-style steel bowl caught on. Birmingham's famous Balti Triangle, a 10-minute taxi ride south of the city centre, is home to a large concentration of authentic balti houses. Shababs restaurant has been a local institution since 1987.

shababsindian.co.uk
££ CHERRY REDS: This kitsch cafe-bar over the road from New Street Station is a hit with locals for its classic brunch menu featuring full English breakfasts and American pancakes, paired with freshly ground coffee from local roastery, Quarter Horse. Vegans and vegetarians are especially well catered for here, as are craft beer drinkers. Visit on evenings for live music. cherryreds.com

£££ SIMPSON'S: Michelin-starred Simpsons moved into Edgbaston in 2004, taking over a sprawling Grade II-listed Georgian villa. Chef-patron Andreas Antona and head chef Luke Tipping's contemporary British menu provides playful twists on classic fine-dining ingredients like lobster, which is barbecued and served with pilaf rice, coconut

www.prideofplacetwistsrestaurant.co.uk



Callie Thirsk, owner of Fox and Chance cocktail bar on Pinfold Street, Birmingham



GETTING THERE & AROUND

Birmingham New Street is at the heart of England's rail network, reachable by direct train from London in 1.5h, Manchester and Cardiff in around 2h, and Edinburgh in 4.5hrs. [trainline.com](https://www.trainline.com) Ryanair and Aer Lingus offer flights from Dublin, Belfast and Cork, all with a journey time of around 1h. [easyjet.com](https://www.easyjet.com) [ryanair.com](https://www.ryanair.com) [aerlingus.com](https://www.aerlingus.com)

Birmingham city centre is compact and can be explored on foot. The West Midlands Metro tram connects New Street with popular nightlife spots including Broad Street and the Jewellery Quarter. [westmidlandsmetro.com](https://www.westmidlandsmetro.com)

WHEN TO GO

As with much of the UK, Birmingham's weather can be temperamental. Summer highs are around 21C, while in December, average daytime temperatures drop to around 8C. Visit in November or December for Birmingham's Frankfurt Christmas Market, the largest market of its kind outside of Germany and Austria, or during the summer for music festivals including Mostly Jazz, Funk & Soul Festival, and Birmingham Mela — Europe's biggest celebration of South Asian music, food and culture. [thebfcm.co.uk](https://www.thebfcm.co.uk) [birminghammela.com](https://www.birminghammela.com)

MORE INFO

[visitbirmingham.com](https://www.visitbirmingham.com)

111 Places in Birmingham That You Shouldn't Miss. £13.99

Second City: Birmingham and the Forging of Modern Britain. £25

HOW TO DO IT

Run of a Kind hosts Birmingham's only guided running tours, taking in parks, street art and more — prices vary depending on length. [runofakind.com](https://www.runofakind.com)

AFTER HOURS

FOX AND CHANCE: Carefully crafted cocktails take centre stage at this unassuming central bar known for its service and locally inspired cocktail names. Deep chesterfield sofas and vintage artworks are nice touches, but it's the bartenders' expert drinks knowledge that sets the bar apart. Try the funky Cannonball rum cocktail, named after a former city jazz club. [foxandchance.co.uk](https://www.foxandchance.co.uk)

NORTONS: This independent bar in the Irish quarter of Digbeth pours some of the best Guinness in the city, alongside a range of cask and keg beers. Drinkers can expect great craic with trad music sessions on weekends and a beer garden showing live sports. There's even a 'split the G' leaderboard with free pints for those who can take a gulp and land the black line between the gap in the 'G' on their Guinness glass. [nortons.bar](https://www.nortons.bar)

HARE & HOUNDS: If you've heard of the Hare & Hounds it's probably because you know someone that saw Ed Sheeran play in its tiny gig room above the pub in 2011. Or so they say. This stalwart venue has indeed brought some of music's biggest names to the sprightly south Birmingham suburb of Kings Heath, including UB40 who, in 1979, played their first ever gig here. [hareandhoundsbirmingham.com](https://www.hareandhoundsbirmingham.com) [birminghamnewsandmagazine.co.uk](https://www.birminghamnewsandmagazine.co.uk) [birminghamnewsandmagazine.co.uk](https://www.birminghamnewsandmagazine.co.uk)

SLEEP

£ BLOC: With 73 cabins inspired by modern, Japanese design and 35 aparthotel suites, Bloc offers great value in a superb location near St Paul's Square. Its lowest rates are found in its compact 'no frills, no window' space-saving rooms that still have king-sized beds, super soft linen and excellent monsoon showers. [blochotels.com/birmingham](https://www.blochotels.com/birmingham)

££ STAYING COOL AT ROTUNDA: For a bird's-eye perspective on Birmingham, stay at this hotel high up in the landmark Rotunda building. It's as central as you can get, with apartment-style rooms featuring kitchens that include complimentary local delicacies such as Birmingham Brewing Co beers and snacks from local zero waste shop The Clean Kilo. [stayingcool.com/locations/birmingham](https://www.stayingcool.com/locations/birmingham)

£££ THE GRAND HOTEL: Birmingham's landmark hotel was empty for almost 20 years before a £50m restoration brought it back to life in 2021. The likes of Winston Churchill and Charlie Chaplin stayed here in their day, and more recently it's hosted film stars such as Tom Cruise and Johnny Depp. The rooms include family and accessible options, as well as penthouse suites with four-poster beds.

There's also an on-site NYC-inspired brasserie, [thebirminghambrasserie.com](https://www.thebirminghambrasserie.com) [birminghamnewsandmagazine.co.uk](https://www.birminghamnewsandmagazine.co.uk) [birminghamnewsandmagazine.co.uk](https://www.birminghamnewsandmagazine.co.uk)



LIFT
STEAKHOUSE & ROOFTOP BAR

Located at the one of the most iconic commercial buildings of the city of Tirana, Aba Business Center, LIFT is about representing a concept of a classic and sophisticated steakhouse combined with style and vibes of a nightlife experience.



SALT



SALT is a restaurant nicety perceived from the people behind the REVO group, which are deeply experienced in hospitality services, property management, marketing, events and more. Salt is about ~~tasting the Mediterranean~~ cuisine, seafood and sushi. It is a one-stop shop for food and beverage experiences,

providing something for everyone from daytime, dining, nightlife and events.

Our mission is to stir up a revolutionary concept of the restaurant by exceeding the clients expectations in a dimension where time, food and drink will savour more.



WASHINGTON, DC

Five of the coolest neighbourhoods

The US capital's classic sights will always appeal, but take the time to stray a little further and you'll find colourful, cosmopolitan neighbourhoods breathing new life into the city. Words: Jonathan Crossley



Many first-time visitors to Washington, DC understandably make a beeline for the striking monuments and museums of the National Mall — the vast expanse of parkland that stretches from the Lincoln Memorial to the US Capitol. Look further afield, however, and the city's eclectic charm unfurls. Over 131 neighbourhoods, each with their own flavour and flare, can be found throughout the city, from the historic enclaves of Georgetown to the global cafes and jazzy bohemian quarters of Adams Morgan.

1 CAPITOL RIVERFRONT

The former site of one of the nation's oldest naval facilities, Capitol Riverfront has been transformed into a haven for sports fans, nature-lovers and foodies. Set along the banks of the Anacostia River, just south of the US Capitol, this fast-growing, urban area has seen its dining scene blossom. Now, visitors can enjoy house-brewed beer at Blue Jacket, locally sourced seafood at The Salt Line and spectacular waterfront views at District Winery, to name a few. The area also draws in legions of passionate baseball and soccer fans. Major Newspaper Baseball Magazine Television Clean Energy Jobs Search <https://t.me/shawthipsoftheworld>

Washington Nationals have their home stadium here, which features outstanding views of the US Capitol dome from many of its 40,000-plus seats, while Audi Field, home to Major League Soccer's DC United, offers state-of-the-art facilities that also host a variety of cultural events, community activities and concerts.

2 GEORGETOWN

Widely regarded as DC's most historic neighbourhood, Georgetown was originally established in the 1700s as a tobacco-port town and housed a lumber yard, cement works and the Washington Flour Mill. Today, visitors can amble its cobblestone streets to scout out its federal architecture and historic landmarks, such as the Old Stone House, the famous steps from *The Exorcist* and the homes of JFK and TV chef Julia Child.

While in the area, be sure to visit the iconic Blues Alley Club, the oldest, continuously operated supper club in the US, which has played host to many international artists. Those looking for a unique dining experience, meanwhile, should head to the 1789 Restaurant & Bar, which serves upscale, contemporary American cuisine in

3 SHAW

Steeped in African American history, Shaw is one neighbourhood that's seen major revitalisation in recent years. It's located in the popular northwest quadrant of Washington, DC and takes its name from Colonel Robert Gould Shaw, who commanded an all-Black regiment during the Civil War. Visitors can learn about the area's rich history at the African American Civil War Memorial Museum, which recalls the events of the war through to the Civil Rights movement with related photos, letters, artefacts and soldier's uniforms.

Shaw also had a thriving alley culture in the 19th and 20th centuries. Located behind DC's blocks of rowhouses, these intersecting, brick-paved zones, once filled with stables, workshops and working-class dwellings, have now become a mecca for trendy restaurants, hip bars and boutiques. Head to Causa, located in Blagden Alley, for Michelin-starred Peruvian seafood, Andean cuisine and one of the nation's largest pisco sour libraries. Alternatively, Supra, located just down the street, is the place to sample traditional Georgian fare, including *khachapuri* (cheese bread and eggs) and *khinkali* (soup dumplings).



4 U STREET

Few of DC's neighbourhoods feature the variety and notoriety of U Street and its trendy 14th Street corridor. An epicentre of art and African American heritage, this bustling stretch of hospitality-packed real estate includes everything from dive bars to avant-garde dining rooms. It's also the place to experience the city's exciting music scene. Bordering the Shaw neighbourhood to the east, the iconic Howard Theatre is one of the best venues to catch a live jazz performance and has seen the likes of Louis Armstrong, Billie Holiday, Duke Ellington and Ella Fitzgerald grace its hallowed stage. Meanwhile, for rock and alternative groups, make a beeline for the revered 9:30 Club. This legendary venue features an electrifying lineup, with sold out shows from upcoming bands and artists.

U Street is also a unique destination for shopping, with various vintage and artisanal stores, quirky boutiques and bookshops. Stop by Salt & Sundry, located on 14th Street corridor, to peruse its eclectic emporium of home wares, jewellery and gifts. These products are created by a mix of independent makers and designers, both local and international.

5 ADAMS MORGAN

Known for its historic houses, colourful murals and cosmopolitan culinary scene, the Adams Morgan neighbourhood captures the essence of the city's diversity. Here, restaurants range from Ethiopian and Ghanaian to Dutch, Cajun, Palestinian, Peruvian, Pakistani and Lebanese. Whatever visitors are looking for, they'll find it along the area's main thoroughfare — vibrant 18th Street. The pace picks up at night when the District's iconic bars, such as Roofers Union and Madam's Organ, host live music, DJ sets and karaoke, while a more lowkey spot, Perry's Rooftop, serves Japanese fare with an extensive drinks menu, including whiskey and sake cocktails.

Adams Morgan is also the ideal place to while away a long afternoon. Scout out the region's kaleidoscope of street art, including vibrant murals, colourful building faces, painted jersey barriers and more, before taking a long stroll through Meridian Hill Park to admire the cascading fountain, which is one of the largest in North America. The best time of year to visit, however, is in September for the annual Adams Morgan Day Festival, which sees the streets come alive with music, food and fun.

Clockwise from left: Washington, DC is known for its neoclassical architecture, including the Capitol building; Perry's Rooftop in Adams Morgan; colourful murals on the walls of Blagden Alley in the Shaw district

PLAN YOUR TRIP

Exploring the wider urban area of Washington, DC is easy on the city's extensive and energy-efficient public transport system, which includes the Metrorail and Metrobus networks. American Sky offers a three-day tour of the city, including flights and accommodation, from £999 per person. For more information, visit americansky.co.uk



ASK THE EXPERTS

NEED ADVICE FOR YOUR NEXT TRIP? ARE YOU AFTER RECOMMENDATIONS, TIPS AND GUIDANCE? OUR EXPERTS HAVE THE ANSWERS...

THE EXPERTS



Steph Dyson
Freelance travel writer



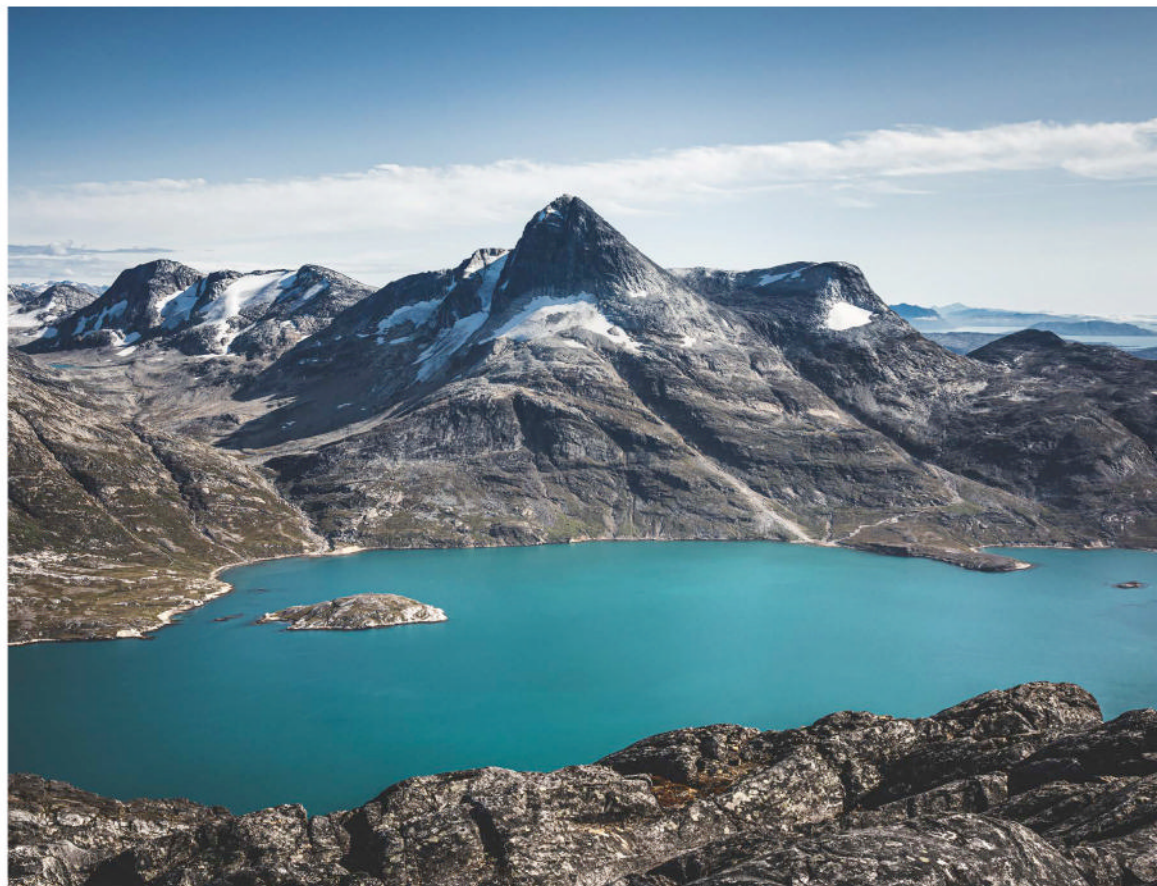
Claire Boobbyer
Freelance travel writer



Kerry Walker
Freelance travel writer



Laura Lindsay
Destinations and travel expert, Skyscanner



Clockwise from above:
The view over Nuup Kangerlua fjord, Greenland; the Brda River winds its way through the heart of Bydgoszcz, Poland; summer sunshine at the Grove of Narberth in Pembrokeshire

How easy is it to travel independently in Greenland and can you suggest a good itinerary for a solo adventure?

While solo adventuring is possible in Greenland, many attractions are only reachable by boat, so you should expect to spend some time on guided tours. Start in Nuuk, the capital, and visit the Greenland National Museum and Archives, which houses the 500-year-old Qilakitsoq mummies, plus exhibitions documenting the island's Indigenous Inuit and colonial history. en.nka.gl

In summer, sail across the vast Nuup Kangerlua fjord to Camp Kangiusaq, a glampsite that offers kayaking and paddleboarding tours between icebergs. From 3,750 DKK (£430), full board, including boat transfers to and

From Nuuk, fly north to Ilulissat, Greenland's adventure capital. Situated at the entrance to the UNESCO-listed Ilulissat Icefjord and Disko Bay, in the Arctic Circle, the town overlooks a dramatic parade of soaring icebergs carved from the Greenland Ice Sheet. Go on a whale safari for the chance to spot pods of humpbacks, fin whales and, if you're lucky, narwhal. Travel by boat to Ilimanaq Lodge for a 22-course tasting menu of foraged Greenlandic food at two-Michelin-star restaurant Koks, which has relocated here from the Faroe Islands until the end of 2024. Afterwards, bed down in Hotel Arctic's Aurora Cabins, which have sweeping bay views and glass roofs for catching the Northern Lights. From 4,595 DKK (£527). In winter, take a snowcat nine miles inland

night in a traditional Inuit abode equipped with thermal mats, sleeping bags and reindeer skins. From 3,995 DKK (£458), full board. diskolineexplorer.com hotelarctic.com worldofgreenland.com

Finish up in Kangerlussuaq, a former US airbase that has around 300 clear nights per year and some of the best conditions for seeing the Aurora Borealis. Make sure to sign up for a dog sledding tour: being pulled along the frozen Qinguata Kuussua river to Kangerlussuaq Fjord by a howl of huskies is a standout Greenlandic experience. Whatever the season, don't miss Point 660, the only part of the Greenland Ice Sheet reachable by vehicle, where you can take teetering steps on the million-year-old ice and even pitch up overnight. albatros-arctic-circle.com

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Will a Cuban stamp in my passport cause problems at the US border?

The US and Cuba have been locked in a Cold War clash since the early 1960s, giving birth to the world's longest-running trade embargo – 62 years and counting. Restrictions relaxed under the Obama administration, but President Trump overturned many of the overtures his predecessor had made towards Cuba during his period of office, including placing the country back on a list of state sponsors

of terrorism in January 2021. President Biden has done little to roll back Trump's clampdown, meaning that if you've travelled to Cuba on or after 12 January 2021, you'll be unable to enter the US under the regular ESTA Visa Waiver Program. You can still travel to the US, but you'll need to apply for a B-2 visitor visa, which means filling out an online form and paying the \$185 (£145) visa fee. You'll then be given a face-to-face appointment at the US Embassy in London or Consulate General in Belfast,

depending on where you live. At the time of writing, the waiting time is 110 days. Note that while Cuba isn't currently stamping foreign passports with entry visas at the border, this policy shouldn't be seen as a free pass to circumvent US law.

Be aware that you can also no longer use an ESTA visa to enter the US if you've travelled to Iran, Iraq, Syria, North Korea, Sudan, Libya, Somalia and Yemen since 1 March 2011. uk.usembassy.gov

CLAIRE BOOBBYER

I'm looking for UK hotels offering foraging excursions. Where would you suggest?

Warmer days, budding hedgerows and sun-dappled woods make late spring the ideal time for a foraging break. The Fife Arms in Braemar, Scotland is a revamped Victorian coaching inn that delivers a slice of Highland wilderness in the Cairngorms National Park. Resident forager Natasha Lloyd leads eye-opening two-hour rambles in search of wild garlic, bilberries, nettles, rosehips

and mushrooms. Kids are welcome, too. From £503, B&B. thefifearms.com

In the Welsh market town of Abergavenny, The Angel Hotel is a stylish, Georgian-era springboard for romps into Bannau Brycheiniog National Park with foraging whizz and author Adele Nozedar. Expect to find edible weeds and flowers, as well as botanicals for infusing gin. From £125. angelabergavenny.com

Alternatively, head west to Grove of Narberth, in Pembrokeshire, to join Craig

Evans as he combs the coastline for samphire, cockles, clams and oysters. From £199, B&B. grovenarberth.co.uk

Near Stoke-on-Trent and the Peak District National Park, The Tawny offers foraging sessions that fit neatly into its back-to-nature ethos. A morning hunting for plants, fruit and fungi rounds out with a forage-focused lunch at The Plumicorn. Later, rest up in eco-chic digs from treehouses to cosy cabins, all with outdoor spa baths. From £250, B&B. thetawny.co.uk
KERRY WALKER



I've yet to organise a family holiday for May half-term. Can you suggest a good-value city break to book last-minute?

There are still great deals available for those willing to shop around, especially if you're open to exploring alternative, lesser-known European cities like Bydgoszcz in Poland or Billund in Denmark – both typically more affordable than mainstay favourites such as Paris and Barcelona, especially during peak school holiday times.

Billund is the perfect place to keep the kids entertained during half-term week. It's home to the original Legoland Resort (often cheaper and less crowded than the UK's Windsor site) and Lalandia Aquadome, Scandinavia's largest tropical waterpark, which features hair-raising slides, a plethora of pools and even its own aromatherapy sauna. Lalandia Aqualand 299 DKK (£34) for a full-day ticket; Legoland Billund Resort from 329 DKK (£38). legoland.dk
lalandia.dk

If you want to explore further afield, Copenhagen is easily reachable by car or public transport, as is historic Aarhus, home to the famous Viking Museum. Billund also provides easy access to the Jutland peninsula, which has an abundance of wildlife trails and biking routes, ideal for those seeking an active break.

At the time of writing, flights during May half-term are still good value. Billund Airport has several connections with UK airports, so it's worth comparing prices before you book, especially if you're within reach of a choice of airports.

sharewithpride.com LAURA LINDSAY



THE INFO

The Channel Tunnel

CONNECTING BRITAIN AND CONTINENTAL EUROPE, THE WORLD'S LONGEST UNDERSEA TUNNEL CELEBRATES A MILESTONE BIRTHDAY THIS MAY

30th

The anniversary the Channel Tunnel marks in 2024. An engineering wonder, it was officially inaugurated on 6 May 1994 by Queen Elizabeth II and the French president, François Mitterrand



32 miles

The length of the tunnel linking Folkestone, England and Calais, France. It runs for 23.5 miles under the English Channel, making it the world's longest undersea tunnel



THE YEAR THE AMERICAN SOCIETY OF CIVIL ENGINEERS DESIGNATED THE TUNNEL A MODERN WONDER OF THE WORLD



4 million

THE NUMBER OF DOGS AND CATS THAT HAVE TRAVELLED THROUGH THE TUNNEL SINCE 2000



246 ft

The depth below sea level the Channel Tunnel reaches. Remarkably, even at such depths, 4G mobile services are available for passengers

TIMELINE



1802

French mining engineer Albert Mathieu-Favier creates a plan to dig a tunnel beneath the English Channel for horse-drawn coaches



1880

The first attempts are made to construct a tunnel to France, from Abbot's Cliff, near Folkestone. The project is soon abandoned



1987

Construction of the Channel Tunnel begins on the English side. Excavation on the French side begins the following year, and the two tunnels meet in 1990



1993

The Channel Tunnel is completed and the first test trains make the journey. The tunnel officially opens the following year

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WORDS: EMMA MONK. IMAGES: GETTY

HOT TOPIC

FOREIGN OFFICE ADVICE

The government has come under fire for being 'dramatic and sensational' in its guidance for trips abroad. But has it really been too harsh?

Half the fun of going on a foreign adventure is dealing with the unexpected, but it's still important to be aware of any potential risks. The Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) provides travellers with detailed online advice on visiting all overseas countries and territories, covering everything from health, safety and security to local laws and entry requirements. But recently it's come under fire for allegedly being outdated and overly harsh in its recommendations, most notably for visitors to Sri Lanka.

What happens if you travel against FCDO advice? Travelling against government advice isn't illegal, but it will invalidate almost all mainstream travel insurance policies. So, if something goes wrong, it has major consequences. It's also worth considering that even if only a single day, or less, of a trip enters an area designated as off limits by the FCDO, it can invalidate the insurance for the duration. Taking out a specialist policy is the best way to ensure you're covered, although these can be costly, especially for older people. The Association of British Insurers can help travellers find a specialist broker. [abi.org.uk](https://www.abi.org.uk)

How does the FCDO assess countries? The advice for each country or territory is constantly being reviewed, and the FCDO uses a number of sources to determine it. These include: local embassies; information provided by local authorities; and, in some cases, information gathered by intelligence services.

The FCDO says: "We know [our assessments] can sometimes have an impact for businesses in the UK and abroad and for international relations, but we don't let this affect our advice." For threats such as coups, civil unrest, terrorism, and political violence, the FCDO says it provides "more newspace" to businesses.



Sigiriya rock fortress is one of Sri Lanka's highlights

outbreaks or natural disasters, it says, “we’ll advise against travel only when we consider the risk to British nationals is unacceptably high”. In the case of terrorism, the FCDO will only advise against travel “in situations of extreme and imminent danger, where the threat is sufficiently specific, large-scale or endemic to affect British nationals severely”.

Is advice getting stricter?

Objectively, no; the way the advice is compiled hasn't changed. But 35 MPs and tour operators have signed an open letter coordinated by the Experience Travel Group saying that the advice on the Sri Lanka page, in particular, is too severe and written in a way that can unnecessarily deter travellers.

In May 2022, the FCDO advised against all but essential travel to Sri Lanka because of the 'ongoing political and economic instability'.

The advice was dropped the following day in the *Los Angeles Times*.

'indiscriminate' terrorist attacks remain today. Detailed information on political and economic protests of 2022 is also still there.

“What’s concerning about Sri Lanka, and it’s probably true of some other destinations, is the wording is so dramatic and sensational,” says Jonny Bealby, founder of adventure tour operator Wild Frontiers, which sells trips to areas the FCDO advises against. “It really puts people off. And the reality on the ground in Sri Lanka is that 99.99% of all our holidays pass off without any trouble at all.”

Out-of-date information doesn't just affect Sri Lanka. On the pages for Spain, for example, details of the 2017 Barcelona and Cambrils terrorist attacks are still carried. The Kenya page still references a single attack at a hotel complex that happened five years ago. So while the FCDO hasn't actively become more harsh in its guidance, it could be argued that it needs to [Greenethink.co.uk/sharewithpride](https://www.greenethink.co.uk/sharewithpride)

Do travellers generally heed advice? Most major operators, such as Tui, Jet2 and EasyJet Holidays, don't sell destinations the FCDO advises against travel to.

Bealby believes most of his customers heed government advice, a view backed up by a recent survey of 4,000 people that found 74% would forgo a free holiday if the FCDO travel advice said a destination was unsafe. The poll, commissioned by Experience Travel Group, also found that 61% of Britons relied on the accuracy of the FCDO travel advice to make decisions.

Martyn Sumners, executive director of the Association of Independent Tour Operators, says: "The FCDO guidance is clearly a leading factor in which countries are selected by holidaymakers. Ministers surely owe it to both travellers and international partners to make sure the guidance is fair, consistent and accurate."

BEN CLATWORTHY *Travel and
(Share with pride) Transport Correspondent at The Times*

CAN TRAVEL CERTIFICATIONS MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

THE NUMBER OF B CORP-CERTIFIED COMPANIES IS GROWING, BUT WHAT DOES THIS MEAN AND CAN INITIATIVES LIKE THIS REALLY HELP US TRAVEL IN A MORE RESPONSIBLE WAY? WORDS: HOLLY TUPPEN

Travel has incredible potential for good. It can boost local economies, provide much-needed funds for conservation and offer employment opportunities. But not all companies operate in a way that benefits the regions they work in, and over recent years this is an issue that's been thrown into the spotlight.

Travellers have increasingly been seeking more responsible experiences. According to Booking.com's 2023 *Sustainable Travel Report*, 76% of respondents want to travel sustainably over the next 12 months, while 2021 research by Google found that 71% of people think travel companies should offer more sustainable choices.

But while a majority of travellers want to book more responsible trips, only about a quarter do. This is known as the 'intention gap'. Factors such as price and convenience play into this, but it can also be because travellers simply don't know where to turn for accurate and reliable information.

The situation hasn't been helped by tenuous sustainability claims and jargon, which have flooded brochures and social media feeds in recent years. This is where certification **More News**

which try to cut through the noise by providing a badge that lets customers know a company is doing all it claims to be doing.

But, with over 100 certifications in the travel industry, even this can be tricky for consumers to navigate. Some involve rigorous checks to ensure a company does what it says, while others involve little more than box-ticking, with no ensuing verification. Some look for generic impact indicators, like recycling initiatives and workplace diversity, while others are tailored specifically to social and environmental risks and opportunities in the travel industry. Working out what each claim means can be tricky for industry experts, let alone the average traveller. Here we unpack one of the fastest growing certifications: B Corp.

Business with purpose

Founded by three friends in the US in 2006, B Lab — the not-for-profit body that certifies B Corporations — aims to help businesses have a better social and environmental impact. To help achieve this, it's designed a process to verify if a company is acting in the best interests of people and the planet.

any company in any sector; B Corp brands range from ethical clothing company Patagonia to ice-cream maker Ben & Jerry's. In travel, certified B Corps include hotels, tour operators and sites listing self-catering options. But what does becoming a B Corp actually involve?

Three things, in short. First, the company must score at least 80 out of 200 in an online assessment that covers governance, workers, community, environment and customers. Each answer is awarded points based on best practice. For example, if at least 40% of managers are women, a company can earn 1.03 points; if it offsets its carbon emissions, it can earn 0.48 points; and by collaborating with other businesses (for example, providing data for research or speaking at events) to help improve environmental performance, it gets 0.41 points.

Next, the company must legally commit to considering its impact on the environment and society rather than just making a profit. This is known as a 'triple bottom line' approach or 'mission lock'. In some parts of the world, like the US, this requires a legal status change to a benefit corporation,

only goal of the company, and that they simultaneously seek to address social, economic and environmental needs.

Elsewhere, like in the UK, companies must instead change the wording of their governance documents to declare that they hope to ‘have a material positive impact on society and the environment’. When making decisions, board members must also consider a range of aspects, including employees, suppliers, society and the environment.

Finally, every B Corp must be transparent about its impact. As a starting point, each has a profile on the B Lab website outlining how it measures up to the standards. These profiles include a report listing the answers to every question in the assessment, although most businesses don't actively promote them.

A growing movement

As the only multi-sector environmental and social certification, B Corp is in demand. So much so that there are waiting times of up to two years for assessment. However, that hasn't put many companies off, particularly in the UK, which is one of the fastest-growing B Corp

is where certification [More News](#) [Newspaper](#) [The Magazines](#) [Telegram Channel](#) [Join Search](#) [http://t.me/sharwithpride](#) [\(share with pride\)](#)



According to a recent report, three-quarters of travellers are keen to book

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Intrepid Travel hired additional female tour guides as part of improvements brought about by B Corp certification

Reasons for going through the B Corp process vary. Some travel companies might want to be part of a community of sustainability leaders, while others might believe it will help to sell more trips to increasingly ethical travellers. Despite the intention gap between people saying they want to book a more sustainable trip and actually doing so, there's no doubt there's rising awareness of social and environmental issues. In a 2023 Nielsen IQ survey, for example, data showed that 46% of consumers wanted brands to lead in creating change.

But for many companies, it's a means of finding points that need improvement and documenting what's been achieved. Zina Bencheikh, EMEA managing director for Intrepid Travel, says, "The B Corp process helped us to identify areas we could improve. For example, we realised we didn't have the right gender balance among our tour leaders, so in 2019 we doubled the number of female tour leaders we worked with."

Intrepid Travel also launched a collection of Women's Expeditions (all-female trips led by local female guides) following the B Corp process. Other businesses say that certification has made them more transparent to consumers

by telling travellers how much carbon each trip is responsible for, or producing the annual Impact Assessment highlighting work across environmental and social indicators. Every B Corp must reapply for assessment every three years, too, so becoming certified can mean embarking on a continual journey of improvement. Mike Bevins, managing director at Sawday's, says, "When we recertified last year, we improved our score to 122.3 [out of 200]. We want to improve in our next certification."

Much Better Adventures, a high-scoring travel B Corp, has found that becoming certified has had some other benefits, too, such as finding new like-minded suppliers. As a result, it's now working with Chilean wildlife tour operator Birds Chile to create a new trip in Patagonia. Co-founder Sam Bruce says, "Knowing that we share an ethos for travel to be a force for good helps build a strong working relationship."

So far, 60 travel businesses have attained B Corp status in the UK, among them Inside Travel Group, Luxury Cottages, Travel Matters, Steppes Travel and Mr & Mrs Smith. About half have joined collective Travel by B Corp to Magazine, Telegraph and Channel 4.

and work more closely together. Co-chaired by Thomas Power, founder of Pura Aventura, which organises tours in Spain, Portugal and South America, and Rochelle Turner, head of sustainability at group tour operator Exodus, the community includes rail specialist Byway and the tour operator Steppes Travel, among others.

For Power, this collaboration is part of the appeal. He says, "The open, collaborative nature of the community is remarkable. We all run individual businesses, but together we can have a greater impact." An example of this cooperation was when the group recently commissioned research from behaviour change specialist Behaviour Smart to better understand how to get travellers to choose more sustainable trips.

A complex reality

While the B Corp badge indicates that a company is trying its best to benefit the places it operates in, unpacking what it actually means for travellers booking a specific trip is a little more complicated. "Sustainable travel is nuanced," Megan Devenish, head of adventure at Much Better Adventures, explains. "Most of a tour operator's environmental and social impacts sit in the supply chain — the businesses, people and services you choose to work with in a destination; for example, a local hiking company or a lodge. So understanding and influencing it can be a complex task."

There's no doubt that there's rising awareness of social and environmental issues among travellers today

The B Lab assessment could be more thorough in unpicking a travel business's impact in the places they operate — according to a report in the *Financial Times*, a company may commit to paying its employees a fair wage, but there are no requirements under the existing process that it should extend this further down the supply chain. That means that, for example, a company could agree to pay its employees at head office a fair wage, but it doesn't have to consider the workers in the hotel they send travellers to, which they don't own. Currently, profits don't have to be reinvested back into the local communities, either.

Changing the assessment process to include the supply chain (shown in purple) will be a positive step

Changing the assessment process to include the supply chain (shown in purple) will be a positive step



B Corp assessment is being revamped, introducing minimum standards across a range of issues, such as environmental stewardship

in an industry where economic leakage — money seeping from local communities into the hands of international businesses — is a concern. According to the UN World Tourism Association, US\$95 of every US\$100 spent on tourism in the developing world leaves host countries.

According to Paul Easto, founder of Wilderness Scotland, these concerns were the reason the company avoided seeking B Corp certification. “We decided to instead channel our energy and resources into tackling issues where we could have the most impact, such as adapting our product and operations to reduce emissions or eliminating all single-use plastics and food waste on our trips.”

But certifications like B Corp have their uses. Xavier Font, professor of sustainability marketing at Surrey University, says: “What the certification provides is a seal of approval that you can probably trust what this company says because it has its house in order.”

Justin Francis, founder of Responsible Travel, agrees: “The best certifications, like B Corp, should give travellers some confidence, but none should be taken at face value. We should instead encourage travellers to be curious and actively engaged instead of blindly accepting certification.” He continues: “Tourism is unique in that what is most important to address varies greatly by destination.”

Examples of this can be found worldwide. For example, water conservation is a pressing issue for hotels in Cape Town, where drought is commonplace, whereas protecting mangrove forests is a priority in Indonesia, where coastal erosion puts local communities at risk. This context is difficult to address in a standardised certification like B Corp.

Rochelle Turner, head of sustainability at Exodus, acknowledges this: “There are some other certifications that are specific to tourism and therefore more aligned to it, like The Long Run’s Global Ecosphere Retreats standard and other Global Sustainable Tourism Council-recognised certifications.” These tend to drill a little deeper into a business’s impact by asking more questions about, for example, its choice of suppliers and the social and environmental risks and opportunities in the

to. Being accessible is a strength of B Corp, creating wider awareness and uptake, but also a potential weakness, diluting what it ultimately means.

B Lab is attempting to address this criticism. The assessment process is currently under review by its Standards Advisory Council (which includes a mix of businesses, independent experts and government bodies) and is open for public consultation. The exact date is yet to be announced, but the first updates are expected to be available later this year and include a shift from the flexible 80-point system to requiring every company to meet minimum standards across multiple issues, such as fair wages and environmental stewardship.

This commitment to continual improvement certainly provides hope in the imperfect world of sustainability stamps. Whether B Corp and other certifications can improve quickly enough to meet the increasing scrutiny of savvy consumers and shifting regulation remains to be seen, but in the meantime, as Thomas Power puts it, “It sounds grandiose, but if we all spend our money with B Corp-type businesses, then our world is

TOP TIPS Booking responsibly

ASK TO SEE AN IMPACT ASSESSMENT

Any business serious about improvement will publish an annual Impact Assessment. Look for data-backed statements and whether it covers everything from local communities to the environment, rather than focusing on just one aspect.

ASK QUESTIONS

The most responsible travel companies train everyone, from sales teams to back-of-house employees, in what it means to have a positive impact. The more you ask questions, the easier it is to spot genuine do-gooders — those who care will generally have the best answers.

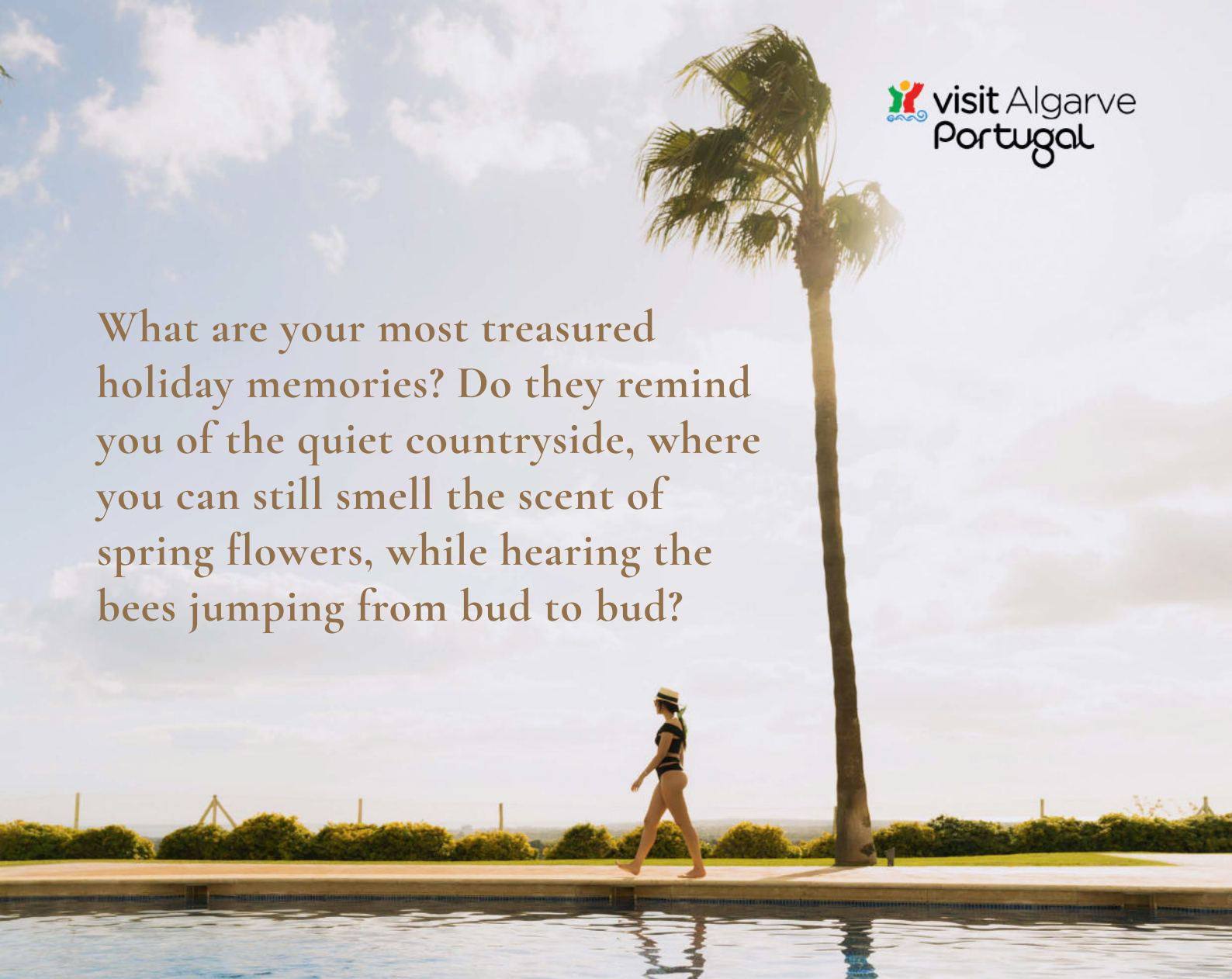
DON'T BE AFRAID TO SPEAK UP

Always consider your impact when travelling — whether on a local community or an environment — and how you’d feel if roles were reversed. If you find yourself in a situation or see something on your itinerary that doesn’t feel right, don’t be afraid to speak up — it’s the first step towards making a positive change.

MORE INFO

travelbybcorp.com
bcorporation.net
gstcouncil.org
unep.org

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STAR LETTER

Unexpected pleasures

I found your magazine in the MRI waiting area of my local hospital. I was, as they say, transported. I enjoyed the shorter articles — I managed to read several in the limited time available, actually feeling anxious I'd be called to my appointment before I'd read enough. But I particularly liked the feature on trekking in Scotland ('Between the Lines', March 2024), having driven through this area recently. **VICTORIA JAY**



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On the rails

Your feature on a Norwegian rail journey ('Slow Train Under the Midnight Sun', April 2024) reminded me of my time travelling around Bergen by train. What was an everyday commute for the locals became an unforgettable memory for me. The route passed through mountain tunnels and emerged next to waterfalls and fjords. I'm now booking another trip to Norway to experience this again. Thank you for the inspiration.

HAYLEY NOBLE

Unfinished business

In March 2020, we were on safari in the Eastern Cape's Shamwari Game Reserve when we were forced to cut our stay short by some 10 days due to Covid. We spent one night in Cape Town, where we enjoyed a superb dinner, before getting on one of the last flights back to the UK. I feel we have unfinished business in South Africa, and your feature on the city's culinary scene (Cover story, March 2024) reminded me it's time to see what we missed.

EWITT DICK (sharewithpride)



Ben Alder Cottage is a bothy on the shores on Loch Ericht, Scotland

BELGIUM

HOW I GOT THE SHOT

TRAVEL PHOTOGRAPHER KEVIN FAINGNAERT REVEALS HOW HE DISTILLED THE HISTORICAL CHARM OF GHENT FOR OUR APRIL ISSUE



Tell us about this image.

Looking to capture Ghent's beauty in a single shot, I found a view looking out over Graslei quay towards three of the city's most iconic towers: St Nicholas Church, the Belfry of Ghent and St Bavo's Cathedral. On the right, people cross St Michael's Bridge and flow towards the Old Centre. In Ghent, history unfolds with every step. Wandering around the city, you encounter ancient cobblestone streets, elegant canals and magnificent architecture at every turn.

How did you get the shot?

This was taken on a mirrorless Canon R5 with a 28-70mm f.2 lens, which is outstanding for both portraits and landscapes and therefore my go-to lens for travel jobs. I arrived with the intention of highlighting the city's historical charm — Ghent is renowned for its medieval


architecture and picturesque canals, and I knew this view showed both at their very best. To make the scene even more magical, I decided to shoot in the morning, when the towers were backlit and the sun was just starting to hit the cobblestones and ornate facades, further heightening the city's timeless allure.

What were the challenges at play?

There are already thousands of photos of the three towers, most of them taken by people on St Michael's Bridge. I wanted to show something similar, but from a fresh perspective. While scouting the location, I found a hotel near the bridge and asked the receptionist if I could take a picture from a room with a riverside view. After I told her I live in Ghent, she was kind enough to show me a room overlooking the canal and let me shoot from the window.

What's the secret to the perfect skyline shot?

Shots like this require a combination of careful planning and artistic vision. Scout for vantage points on Google Maps before heading out. You're looking for locations that offer a unique perspective of the skyline, such as high-rise buildings, hills or waterfront areas. Pay close attention to lighting, too, as light quality can make or break a skyline shot. Golden hour often provides a soft light that will add a magical glow to images. And don't forget to pay attention to composition principles such as the rule of thirds, positioning key elements of the skyline along the lines of an imaginary grid to create a balanced composition. Including interesting foreground elements can also add depth and context.

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A photograph of three modern, glass-walled cabins on stilts in a snowy, rocky landscape at night. The cabins are illuminated from within, showing people inside. Above the cabins, the Aurora Borealis (Northern Lights) is visible in the dark sky, displaying vibrant green and blue hues.

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